



MIXED MARITIME MOVEMENTS

in South-East Asia in 2015



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Mixed maritime movements are by their nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. The information in this report is compiled from various sources, including governments, implementing partners, media reports, and over 1,000 direct interviews with persons of concern to UNHCR who have undertaken mixed maritime journeys in South-East Asia.

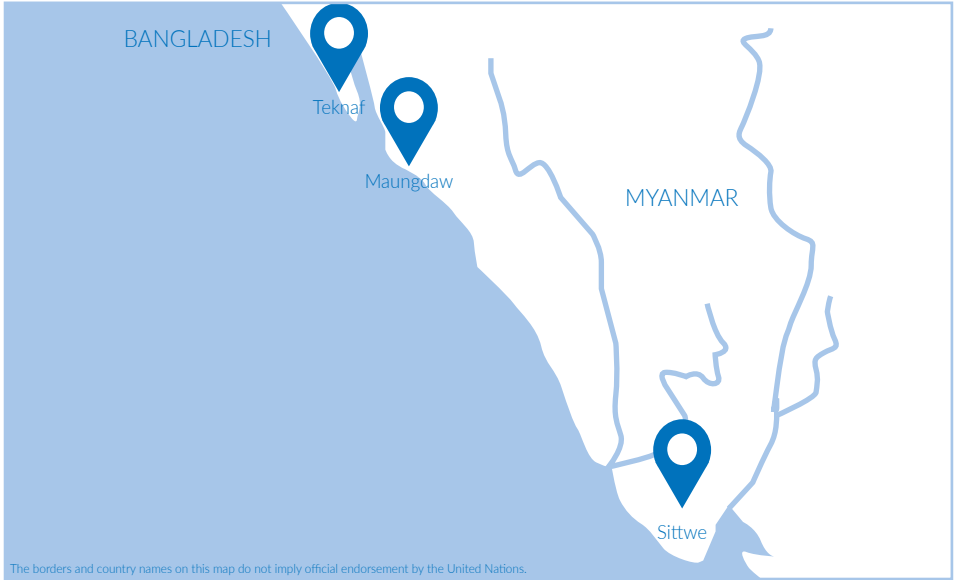
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Rohingya and Bangladeshis stranded at sea wait for food to be dropped from a helicopter on 14 May 2015.

Summary

- In 2015, mixed maritime movements in South-East Asia were characterized by two distinct phases: from January to May, when the volume crossing the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea was significantly greater than during the same period in previous years; and from June to December, when such movements all but disappeared following the abandonment of thousands of refugees and migrants at sea in May.
- Some 1,600 refugees and migrants were estimated to have departed by sea from the Bay of Bengal in the second half of 2015, 96% less than in the second half of 2014. By contrast, the 31,000 departures estimated in the first half of 2015 were 34% higher than in the first half of 2014.
- Refugees familiar with the route told UNHCR in interviews that the sharp decline in departures in the second half of 2015 was a result of increased scrutiny by—and of—authorities at both departure and arrival points and harsher conditions upon arrival, as demonstrated by the discovery of mass graves and the continued detention in Malaysia of the hundreds of refugees who disembarked in May.
- In total, approximately 33,600 refugees and migrants travelled through South-East Asia in mixed maritime movements in 2015, including approximately 1,000 who either crossed the Strait of Malacca or attempted to reach Australia from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam.
- Mixed maritime movements originating from the Bay of Bengal in particular continued to result in scores of deaths at a fatality rate three times higher than in the Mediterranean Sea. In 2015, approximately 370 refugees and migrants who departed from the Bay of Bengal are estimated to have died before reaching land, mostly from starvation, dehydration, disease, and abuse by people smugglers.



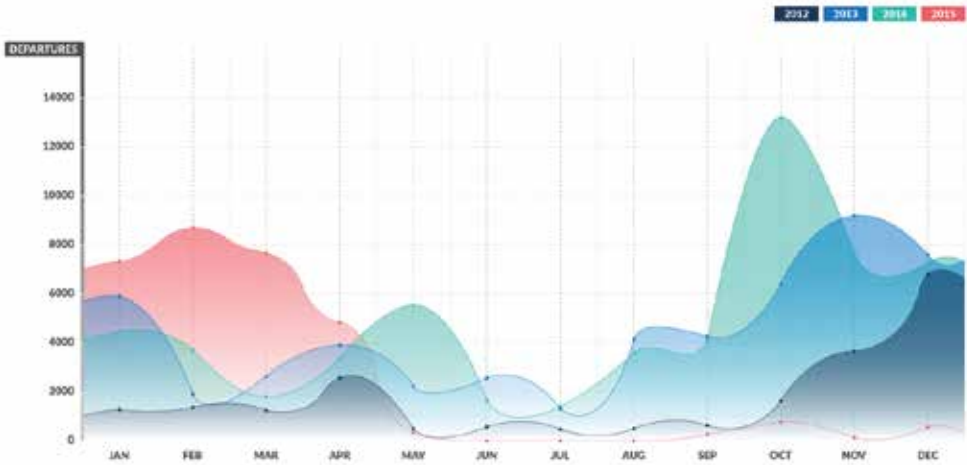
Markers represent common departure points.

Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea

As in previous years, mixed maritime movements originating in the Bay of Bengal generally departed from the Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime border, in the area spanning from Teknaf in Bangladesh to Maungdaw in Myanmar. An estimated 30,700 people from Bangladesh and Myanmar departed from this area in 2015, with an additional 2,000 believed to have embarked near Sittwe in Myanmar. Since 2012, nearly 170,000 refugees and migrants—equal to about 5% of the combined populations of the bordering districts of Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh and Maungdaw in Myanmar—are believed to have travelled by sea from Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Estimated mixed maritime departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime border (2012-2015)

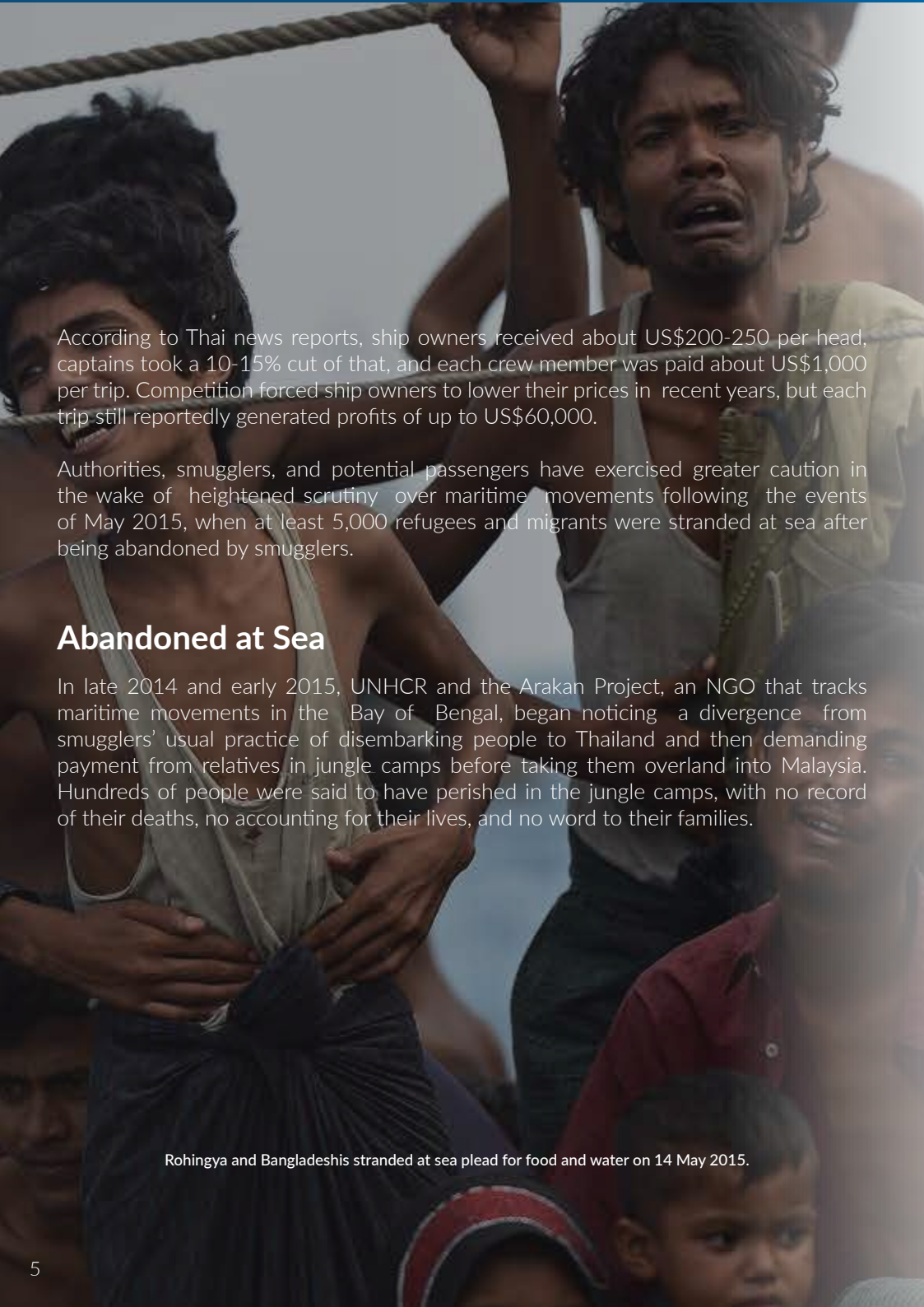
Source: UNHCR, 7 January 2016



Approximately 12 of every 1,000 people who embark on mixed maritime movements from the Bay of Bengal do not survive the boat journey. This means as many as 2,000 Bangladeshis and Rohingya may have died before ever reaching land in the past four years. Smugglers are culpable for virtually all these deaths, which are almost entirely the result of hunger, thirst, illness, or beatings and gunshot wounds inflicted by boat crews. The insufficient food on board—usually not more than one or two handfuls of rice per day—has resulted in severe malnutrition causing beriberi. In the first half of 2015, 77 Rohingya who approached the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur presented with symptoms of beriberi.

Until early 2015, survivors usually disembarked discreetly in southern Thailand and were moved by smugglers to jungle camps along the Thailand-Malaysia border. They were then held for ransoms of up to US\$2,000, usually extorted by calling a captive's family and forcing them to listen to the cries of their loved ones being beaten.

Annual revenues generated by people smuggling in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea are estimated to range between US\$50-100 million. Head smugglers reaped most of the profits; their recruitment agents, often family and friends of potential passengers, were reportedly paid US\$40-65 for each passenger they loaded or, in some cases, kidnapped.



According to Thai news reports, ship owners received about US\$200-250 per head, captains took a 10-15% cut of that, and each crew member was paid about US\$1,000 per trip. Competition forced ship owners to lower their prices in recent years, but each trip still reportedly generated profits of up to US\$60,000.

Authorities, smugglers, and potential passengers have exercised greater caution in the wake of heightened scrutiny over maritime movements following the events of May 2015, when at least 5,000 refugees and migrants were stranded at sea after being abandoned by smugglers.

Abandoned at Sea

In late 2014 and early 2015, UNHCR and the Arakan Project, an NGO that tracks maritime movements in the Bay of Bengal, began noticing a divergence from smugglers' usual practice of disembarking people to Thailand and then demanding payment from relatives in jungle camps before taking them overland into Malaysia. Hundreds of people were said to have perished in the jungle camps, with no record of their deaths, no accounting for their lives, and no word to their families.

Rohingya and Bangladeshis stranded at sea plead for food and water on 14 May 2015.

Ethnic Rohingya who had recently arrived in Malaysia by boat were also telling UNHCR that demands for their ransoms had been made at sea, and upon payment, they had disembarked in groups of 60-80 directly to Malaysia, either to the island of Langkawi or to the mainland.

Around the same time, according to a Reuters report, Thai authorities opened an investigation into a smuggler in Thailand, based on a complaint filed by a Rohingya roti seller whose nephew was being held hostage, even though the roti seller had already paid the ransom. The nephew was reportedly killed in retaliation. On 28 April 2015, the smuggler under investigation was arrested.

Three days later, Thai authorities discovered five bodies next to a camp in the southern province of Songkhla. On 2 May 2015, they found 21 more bodies at the same site, then six more a few kilometres away. On 7 May 2015, 30 new graves were unearthed near another camp.

The ensuing crackdown on human smuggling and trafficking networks in Thailand prevented smugglers from disembarking thousands of refugees and migrants still at sea. Rather than risk capture by authorities, the smugglers cut their losses. On or around 9 May 2015, they consolidated passengers into fewer boats, packing upwards of 1,000 people on 30-metre long trawlers, and absconded in the empty boats they had salvaged.

Over 5,000 people were left stranded at sea on at least eight boats—there were unconfirmed reports of more—most of which were drifting in the waters just off the resort islands of Koh Lipe, Thailand, and Langkawi, Malaysia. The abandoned passengers managed to navigate the vessels towards the coasts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, but authorities in each country initially refused to allow the vessels to land. Instead, they sent naval personnel to provide food and water, repair engines, and escort the vessels back into international waters.



Rohingya and Bangladeshis stranded off the coast of Aceh, Indonesia, wait to be rescued on 20 May 2015. AFP/Januar

The “Receive Ghor” Ship

According to refugees interviewed by UNHCR who were at sea in April and May 2015, up to a dozen boats during that time would linger near Thai islands such as Koh Tarutao, encircling a much larger cargo ship known as a “receive *ghor*” ship. A “receive ghor,” or house, is what smugglers call the compounds in Malaysia that serve as the final way stations for smuggled individuals waiting to be released to relatives or friends, and allows smugglers to extract one final “rent” payment of between US\$50-100.

The “receive ghor” ship combined these functions with those of the jungle camps in Thailand to become one large holding pen for anyone who could not pay, or anyone who could pay but could not yet be disembarked. Thousands of people were said to be held on just a couple “receive ghor” ships.

Abdul Amin*, 27, was on a gray and red, steel-hulled “receive ghor” ship for four months. After being beaten badly during the first month, he asked to be a cook on the boat; not that it would pay off his debt, but merely to avoid the beatings.

It was an almost 24-hour job. He was part of a team of 10 cooking for as many as 1,200 passengers. Each of the two daily meals took hours to prepare, then hours to serve, as Abdul Amin climbed up and down the ship ladders to each of eight decks, bringing water to wash every individual’s hands, then plastic bowls of food, then repeating the circuit to retrieve the bowls and wash hands once more. By the time he finished cleaning the bowls, it was time to cook again.

**All names have been changed for protection reasons.*

Deaths and Rescues

On 10 May 2015, Acehnese fishermen helped rescue a boat carrying nearly 600 Bangladeshis and Rohingya that had drifted near the coast of Lhokseumawe, Indonesia. The next day, 1,110 more people from two more boats came ashore in Langkawi, Malaysia, where authorities enlisted the help of local Rohingya communities to locate and identify hundreds who had scattered across the island. A fourth boat and its 116 Bangladeshi passengers were rescued by Bangladeshi authorities near St. Martin's Island the following day.

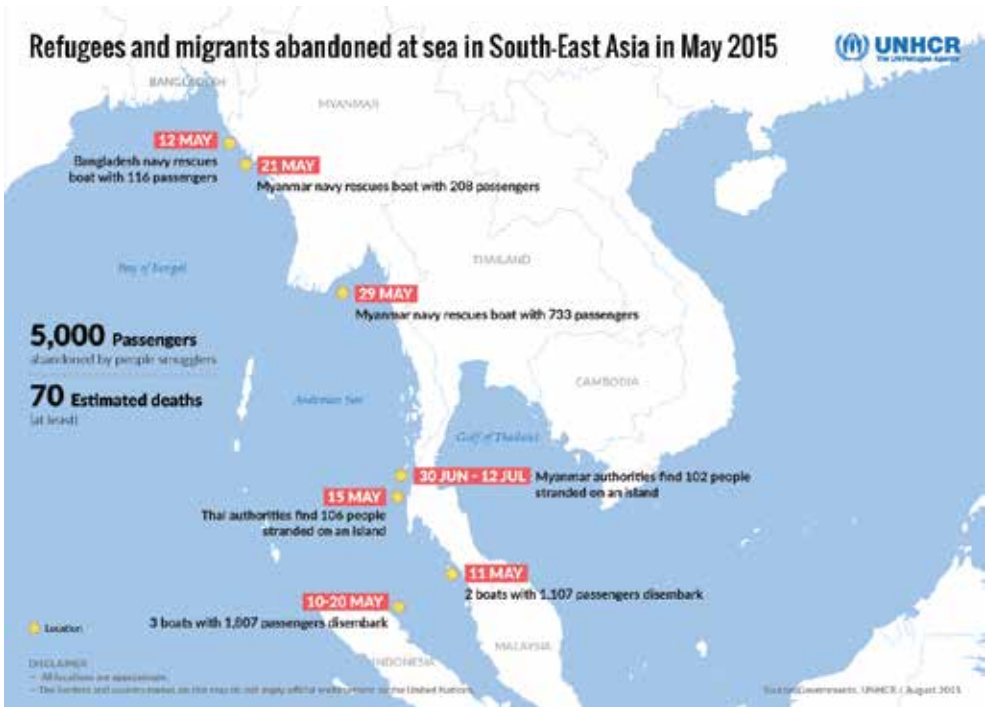
On 14 May 2015, journalists and Thai authorities located a fifth boat carrying around 400 people off the coast of Koh Lipe. The authorities provided food and water before towing the boat further out to sea.

Around the same time, approximately 850 passengers on a sixth boat floating off the Sumatran coast between Langsa and Medan engaged in, or hid from, a deadly confrontation over the little water that remained on board. They had come into contact with naval authorities on at least two occasions in previous days, and both times were reportedly towed away from shore. In the confrontation that followed, at least 13 people were hacked to death or drowned after jumping or being pushed into the sea. Eight hundred and twenty people were rescued by fishermen on 15 May 2015, though one of them, a three-year-old girl, died of tetanus five days later.

The same day of the rescue, 106 Bangladeshis and Rohingya were found on an island in southern Thailand, also abandoned by people smugglers. Although most remain in detention or in shelters in Thailand, a group of 11 escaped from their shelter in January 2016.



A Rohingya woman from Myanmar bids farewell to her three-year-old daughter who died days after being rescued by Indonesian fishermen.
UNHCR/Ardi Sofinar



On 20 May 2015, the boat discovered by journalists and Thai authorities in the waters off Koh Lipe was sighted near Langsa, Indonesia, and rescued by fishermen. Survivors said 10 people on their boat had died en route. A Rohingya woman from Maungdaw, travelling with her three children, remembers four men stricken with diarrhea dying on consecutive days, each one wrapped in a cloth, given funeral prayers, then dropped overboard. Another man who argued with the crew about the lack of food was beaten nearly to death, but was still visibly struggling as he, too, was wrapped in a cloth and tossed into the sea.

Over the next 10 days, Myanmar authorities found a seventh and eighth boat off the Myanmar coast and disembarked over 900 Bangladeshis and Rohingya. There were also reports of dozens of bodies washing ashore along the coast of Rakhine State, Myanmar. In Malaysia, 139 graves believed to be those of people smuggled from Bangladesh and Myanmar were discovered near the border with Thailand. Another 24 were found in August 2015.

In total, the remains of over 220 people were unearthed in or around smugglers' camps in Malaysia and Thailand in 2015.

In Malaysia, 2,498 Rohingya were in detention as of 31 December 2015, 53% more than the 1,634 detained at the end of 2014. This includes all 375 Rohingya who disembarked in Langkawi in May 2015, and whom the Malaysian Government intended to resettle within one year of their arrival, though without consulting UNHCR or potential resettlement countries. Given the potential pull factor and limited availability of resettlement—there is only enough resettlement capacity for less than 1% of refugees worldwide—alternative solutions are required for Rohingya who disembarked in Indonesia and Malaysia. Such solutions may include temporary refuge or alternative humanitarian stay measures that ensure access to health, education, and work, which would confer dignity and self-reliance while also easing the burden on host countries.

International Response

A series of regional meetings was convened to address states' concerns over the large number of refugees and migrants travelling by sea, resulting in common outcomes that included prioritizing saving lives, combating people smuggling and trafficking, expanding legal migration alternatives, and confronting the root causes of such movements:

- **20 May 2015 - Putrajaya, Malaysia:** The foreign ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand met and Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to offer “temporary shelter provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community.”
- **29 May 2015 - Bangkok, Thailand:** The Royal Thai Government invited affected countries in the region to a Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean, resulting in 17 proposals for immediate response, prevention of irregular migration, and addressing root causes.
- **2 July 2015 - Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia:** An Emergency ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime Concerning Irregular Movement of Persons in Southeast Asia recommended the creation of a joint task force and trust fund to respond to the mixed movements of refugees and migrants.
- **27-28 November 2015 - Jakarta, Indonesia:** The countries party to the 20 August 2013 Jakarta Declaration on Addressing Irregular Movement of Persons participated in a roundtable discussion to identify root causes, explore potential responses, and foster regional cooperation, including by using the Sustainable Development Goals as a guideline and strengthening existing multilateral mechanisms such as the Bali Process.
- **4 December 2015 - Bangkok, Thailand:** Countries that participated in the 29 May 2015 Bangkok Special Meeting reconvened to explore the possibility of an “Action Agenda” for implementing the 17 proposals of the 29 May 2015 Bangkok Special Meeting, with further steps to be discussed by the main affected countries—Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand—on the sidelines of the Ad Hoc Group Senior Officials' Meeting of the Bali Process on 1-2 February 2016.

A Dream Deferred

In some ways, Kasim is a normal 17-year-old. His favourite article of clothing is his FC Barcelona jersey. He wants to be a doctor. He does not listen to his parents, and even ran away from home. But the jersey is a donation, Kasim was not allowed to go to high school, and the home he ran away from was a refugee camp in Bangladesh, 1,900 km away. It was his birthplace—Kasim has been a refugee his entire life.

Primary education was available in the camp, but the schools there have only recently been permitted to extend their curriculum up to year eight. When Kasim finished primary school a few years ago, no classes beyond year five were available to refugees. So he thought of other ways to get an education.

First, he pretended to be Bangladeshi, enrolling in a local high school for three years with some other refugee children. He was preparing to enter year nine when administrators at the school discovered Kasim was a refugee. He was expelled.

Kasim's mother told him to put aside his dream of being a doctor. "We can't accomplish that," Kasim remembers her saying. "I'm so sorry."

But Kasim was undeterred. "I decided myself that I'll go to another country," he said. "Maybe someone or some government will allow me to study."

Kasim knew many other Rohingya who had paid smugglers to take them to Malaysia by boat, but as their only son, his parents would not allow it. Desperate to learn, Kasim defied them, leaving the camp one night in March 2015 without their knowledge. A smuggler offered to take him to Malaysia without any upfront payment, and Kasim embarked on a small vessel from Teknaf, passing St. Martin's Island before boarding a larger boat that took him into Thai waters.

For nearly two months, he crouched shoulder to shoulder alongside hundreds of other passengers, with no toilet except for a couple wooden planks held aloft over the sea by iron rods welded to the outside of the hull.

When smugglers abandoned their human cargo en masse in early May 2015, Kasim was transferred to a boat that was prevented from landing by authorities before a deadly fight for drinking water erupted, killing at least 13 people. Another passenger was already dead after the ship's captain shot him in the head for unknown reasons. The man was wrapped in a **longyi**, given funeral rites, and thrown overboard.

After the fight, Kasim was rescued by Indonesian fishermen and brought to a temporary shelter. He had given up everything – his home, his family, and very nearly his life – for the chance of an education, but little had changed. He was still in a camp. He still had no school to go to. And he still wanted to be a doctor.

Kasim was born in a refugee camp in Bangladesh.
UNHCR/Tamizy Harva





Rescued Rohingya and Bangladeshis receive medical treatment and a place to rest at a temporary shelter in Aceh, Indonesia, in May 2015. AFP/Chaideer Mahyuddin

Status of May-July 2015 Disembarkations

Country of disembarkation	Officially disembarked		Remaining (detained)		Bangladeshis repatriated	Rohingya movement
	Rohingya	Bangladeshi	Rohingya	Bangladeshi		
Bangladesh	0	134	-	-	-	-
Myanmar	216 <small>(at least 700 additional Rohingyas disembarked unofficially)</small>	846	0	0	777	195 <small>returned home to Rakhine State</small>
Thailand	59	52	44 (40)	52 (52)	0	15 <small>escaped</small>
Malaysia	375	735	375 (375)	116 (116)	622	~200 <small>confirmed to have arrived from Indonesia</small>
Indonesia	999	821	310	26	743	~700 <small>believed to have left Indonesia</small>

Beyond the Bay of Bengal

Based on media reports, 263 people, 97% of whom were from South or South-East Asia, attempted to reach Australia—or, in one case, New Zealand—by boat in 2015. Each of the nine vessels that made the attempt was either intercepted by Australian authorities, apprehended by Indonesian authorities, or both. The vessels departed from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam, and carried passengers from Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam.

As of 31 December 2015, 2,261 people who had travelled in mixed maritime movements were in detention facilities in Australia or the offshore processing centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.



Markers represent points of interception, apprehension, and return.

Women and Girls

The number of women and girls travelling in mixed maritime movements from the Bay of Bengal has gradually increased in recent years, and made up about 15% of all passengers in 2015. Virtually all the women and girls are Rohingya. Many, like dozens who have spontaneously departed from shelters in Indonesia, are hoping to join husbands they have never met.

Some women travelling alone embark with no pre-arranged marriage, knowing they will have to wed whichever man their smugglers find to pay for their release. Others believe they have an arrangement in place only to find out en route that the man has disappeared.

The marriages are arranged for a variety of motivations. Rohingya men in Malaysia find it cheaper to marry Rohingya women in Myanmar than those in Malaysia. Rohingya women in Myanmar find local marriage restrictions in Rakhine State, or the bribes to circumvent them, prohibitive.

Whatever the circumstances, the inability of a minor to give free and informed consent, clouded further by these most exploitative of settings, means the physical and emotional health of hundreds of Rohingya girls, and any children they will or already have, is seriously jeopardized, at sea but also on land, by the forces compelling these marriages of flight.

Halida, 15, sits in a shelter in Aceh, Indonesia. Pregnant and widowed, Halida felt she had no options but to board a smugglers' boat from Sittwe, Myanmar, in the hope that she could join her father in Malaysia.
UNHCR/Tarmizy Harva



Separated by the Sea

Hundreds, if not thousands, of refugee families in South-East Asia have been separated by mixed maritime movements in 2015. Here are some of their stories.

Hassan and Fatima

In his hometown of Buthidaung, Myanmar, Hassan was a driver for a local Rohingya leader. But when intercommunal violence engulfed the area in 2012, extremists began to target him. He fled by boat to Malaysia, forced to leave his wife Fatima and their two young children behind.

"Don't cry," he told his son, after finally finding the means and a smuggler to bring them over two years later. "We'll be seeing each other very soon."

Hassan agreed to pay a total of 11,000 ringgit (US\$2,670), with half to be delivered by Fatima before she embarked and the rest settled upon the family's arrival. They expected to reach Malaysia within three weeks. That was in March 2015.

Forty-seven days after their departure, Hassan received a call saying his family was near Thailand and that full payment was due immediately. "I told them I didn't believe them," he says. "Unless I had my family in my hands."

But his sons were just five and two years old. The longer his family lingered, the more likely they would be arrested, fall ill, or die. He had no choice. Hassan paid.

He did not hear from anyone for 11 days, until he received two missed calls from an Indonesian number while he was at work. He called back, but the number was no longer in service. Later that day, his phone rang again.

"Assalamualaikum," said a familiar voice.

"Allah saved you," Hassan said to Fatima, through tears.

"I had new life," Fatima remembered. "We were dead in the sea."

She told Hassan that her boat had been towed towards Malaysia by the Indonesian navy, and then towards Indonesia by the Malaysia navy, before a deadly fight broke out between Bangladeshi and Rohingya onboard. The boat was sabotaged and, as it sank, Fatima and the children were rescued by fishermen.

“I am happy they are alive, in a safe place,” Hassan told UNHCR back in June 2015. “But I want to see my children. That’s all I want to do.”

In a Rohingya community
in Pahang, Malaysia, Hassan holds
his official Myanmar family photograph.
UNHCR/Keane Shum



Abdul Rashid and Senowara

"I have no space to live," Abdul Rashid told his wife, Senowara. It was one of the last times he saw her and their newborn child, over a year ago, when Abdul Rashid was preparing to leave their home in Maungdaw, Myanmar. As a mullah, a religious leader, he felt targeted, and was desperate for a way out. "If you can't find me," Abdul Rashid told Senowara, "Please understand I've left already."

In January 2015, a smuggler offered to take Abdul Rashid to Malaysia by boat for just 50,000 kyat (USD 40) up front, with the understanding that Abdul Rashid would work in Malaysia for months, if not years, to pay off the full cost of the journey, which can be as much as USD 2,000. Abdul Rashid remembers the smugglers counting out over 1,000 passengers on his boat, dozens of whom died along the way from deprivation and beatings by the crew. He crouched next to another Rohingya man from Maungdaw who starved quietly until, one night, he could no longer be woken.

After being held on land for weeks, near to where the remains of over 200 Rohingya and Bangladeshis were later found by authorities, Abdul Rashid made it to Malaysia in March 2015. He began working in construction and carpentry, sending whatever he earned back to Senowara, so that she and their baby could join him.

Abdul Rashid keeps a photograph of his detained wife and child on his phone.
UNHCR/Keane Shum



By May 2015, Abdul Rashid knew his wife and son were at sea, but he had no idea where. A few days later, she called, saying the entire crew had abandoned ship in a speedboat and directed the passengers towards Malaysia. They and over 5,000 others had been cast adrift in the Andaman Sea when smugglers found they could no longer disembark their human cargo undetected.

Their baby was sick, Senowara told Abdul Rashid over the phone. He became desperate to get them off the boat and so, despite warnings not to, called one of the smugglers, unsolicited. He has a recording of the call, which begins with Abdul Rashid introducing himself as a mullah.

"My wife is with our baby, and the baby is sick," Abdul Rashid tells the smuggler. "I would like to request you to kindly bring them to shore."

"Mothers with small children," says the smuggler. "There are 22 mothers and 22 small children." He explains that the women and children have been particularly difficult to disembark, because they are less able to walk through the night undetected. "Can we stop the children from talking?" the smuggler asks, rhetorically.

"Brother," says Abdul Rashid. "My child isn't big enough to talk. He isn't even one."

The boat carrying Abdul Rashid's wife and child was one of two that arrived in Langkawi on 11 May 2015, with a total 1,110 passengers, including 375 Rohingya. All were transferred to the Belantik Immigration Detention Centre in Kedah, where the Rohingya remain detained. Almost all the Bangladeshis have been repatriated.

Working without legal status in a foreign country, as his wife and child languish behind bars, Abdul Rashid now wrestles with his decision to leave Myanmar. "I wouldn't tell anyone to take this journey," he says, his voice full of anguish. He remembers the unbearable suffering his family endured back home, but also cannot help yearning, he says, "To stay in a country that you can say belongs to you."

Rohima, Ali, and Shahida

“We lost everything,” says Rohima, as she recalls the intercommunal violence that wracked Sittwe, Myanmar, in 2012. As her village burned, Rohima sought safety wherever she could find it, and joined other Rohingya boarding fishing boats bound for Malaysia. But she could only afford to take one of her three children with her. Faced with an impossible choice, Rohima took her youngest son, who was eight at the time. She left her older son Ali, then 15, and daughter Shahida, 11, with their aunt.

After reaching Malaysia, Rohima was detained for four months. UNHCR helped secure her release and she began working as a street cleaner, hoping to save enough money to eventually bring Ali and Shahida over. “I am making money, I am working,” she would tell them over the phone. “I will bring you here.”

By early 2015, Rohima still did not have enough money for the journey, but Ali and Shahida insisted on joining their mother and younger brother. “They miss you so much,” their aunt told Rohima over the phone. “They are crying for you.”

In April 2015, when smugglers in Sittwe offered passage to Malaysia without any up-front payment, the family decided to risk the journey even without the means to pay. On the way, Ali and Shahida were moved from boat to boat, as smugglers jockeyed to unload passengers whose relatives could not afford payment. One boat they were transferred to was rumoured to be a kind of floating market of bad debt, where new smugglers could assume the passengers’ payment obligations at a lower price, confident they would eventually be able to extract the funds.

In between these transfers, Rohima received a call from a smuggler who claimed that Ali and Shahida were in Thailand, and it would cost 6,000 ringgit (US\$1,440) to deliver them to Malaysia. They put Ali on the line.

“While he was talking to me, he was saying he was being beaten,” said Rohima. “His voice was so faint, so small.”

Rohima later learned that Ali and Shahida were actually still at sea. But it made no difference – she had no way to pay.


Three days later, Rohima's phone rang again. It was Ali. He and Shahida were in Indonesia. The last boat they had been transferred to was the first that disembarked there in May.

In June 2015, UNHCR arranged a Skype video call between Rohima and her younger son in Malaysia, and Ali and Shahida in Indonesia. It was the first time they had seen each other in three years.


"You look healthy," Rohima told Ali. "Take care of your sister." She told Shahida not to cry.

Their little brother bounced around, trying to squeeze himself into the view of the phone camera. "You look handsome now!" he told Ali.

At the time of writing, Ali and Shahida were believed to have spontaneously departed from their temporary shelter in Indonesia. Their whereabouts are unknown, and Rohima's phone number is no longer in service.



Rohima, a Rohingya refugee in Selangor, Malaysia, Skypes with her son Ali and daughter Shahida, who are in Aceh, Indonesia, while their younger brother and other relatives look on. It is the first time they have seen each other in three years. UNHCR/Keane Shum



Indonesian fishermen tow a boat of Rohingya and Bangladeshis towards Aceh, Indonesia, on 20 May 2015. *AFP/Januar*