

SOUTH-EAST ASIA

MIXED MARITIME MOVEMENTS

April – June 2015

KEY FIGURES

At least **5,000**

Refugees and migrants abandoned by people smugglers in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea

Over **1,000**

Additional passengers believed to have been on smugglers' boats who remain unaccounted for

At least **8**

Vessels abandoned by smugglers

At least **70**

Estimated deaths on vessels abandoned by smugglers

Over **200**

Graves discovered by authorities near smugglers' camps along the Thailand-Malaysia border

55%

Proportion of children among maritime arrivals in Indonesia registered by UNHCR

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 hundreds of direct interviews with persons of concern who have undertaken mixed maritime journeys in South-East Asia.

HIGHLIGHTS



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Around 400 refugees and migrants were found on a boat stranded off the coast of Thailand on 14 May 2015. It eventually drifted across the Malacca Strait and was rescued six days later by fishermen off Aceh, Indonesia.

- At least 5,000 refugees and migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh found themselves stranded at sea in May, when the people smugglers and ship crews who had promised to take them to Malaysia abandoned them en masse in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. An additional 1,000 people who were thought to be at sea in May and remain unaccounted for may have unofficially disembarked without the knowledge of authorities.
- Based on hundreds of interviews with those who disembarked, and the fatality rate observed on smugglers' boats in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea since 2014, at least 70 people are estimated to have died at sea on ships abandoned in May, for the same reasons as in previous quarters: starvation, dehydration, disease, and abuse by boat crews.* There were additional reports of drownings while disembarking, and many remain missing.
- Naval authorities in the region initially did not allow abandoned vessels to disembark and, in some cases, reportedly pushed them further out to sea. Malaysia and Indonesia later agreed to offer temporary shelter to those still at sea and countries in the region subsequently met and put forward a set of proposals to provide humanitarian assistance, prevent human smuggling and trafficking, and address the root causes of these mixed maritime movements.

* The estimated fatality rate is derived from the number of deaths interviewees reported, divided by the number of passengers interviewees said were on their boats, with statistical outliers excluded.

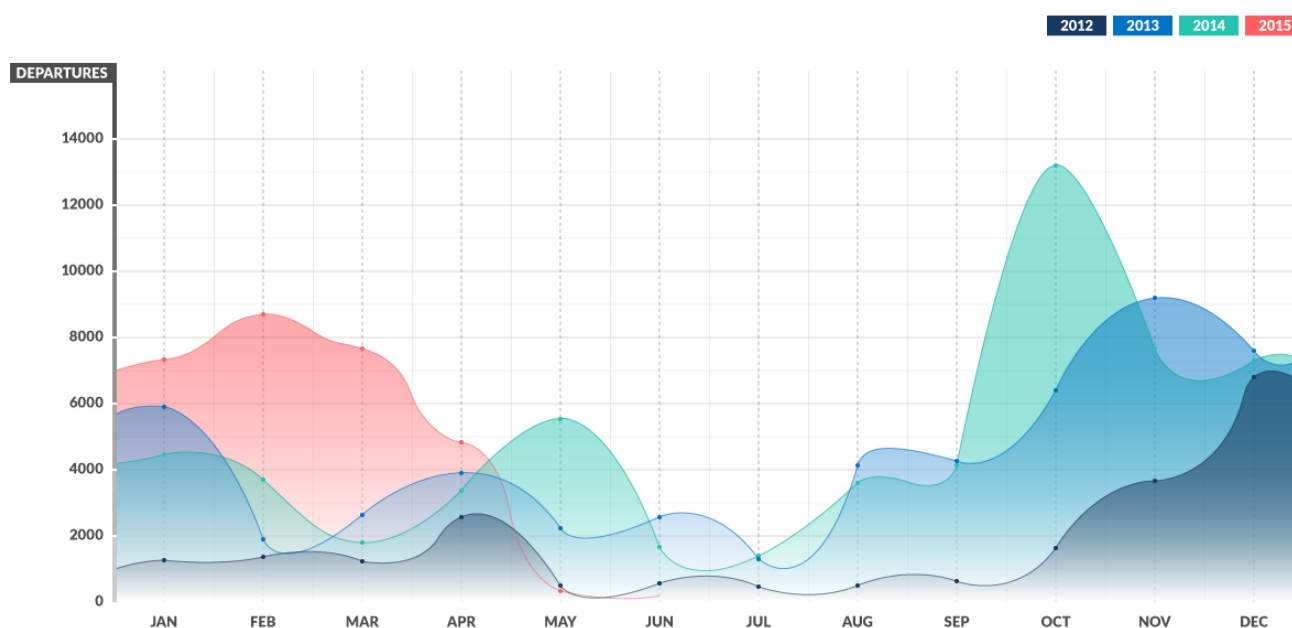
BACKGROUND

- Since 2014, approximately 94,000 refugees and migrants are estimated to have departed by sea from Bangladesh or Myanmar, including 31,000 departures in the first half of 2015. Although no departures have been reported since May, this still represents a 34 percent increase compared to the first half of 2014. Over 1,100 people are now estimated to have died at sea along this route since 2014, including an estimated 370 deaths in 2015.
- In late 2014 and early 2015, amidst [a surge in departures](#) from the Bay of Bengal, interviews with some recent maritime arrivals in Malaysia [revealed](#) a departure from smugglers' usual practice of disembarking passengers to Thailand and then demanding payment from relatives in jungle camps before taking them [overland into Malaysia](#). Instead, demands for ransom were sometimes being made at sea, and upon payment, some passengers were disembarking in groups of 60-80 directly to Malaysia, either to Langkawi or to the mainland, including [one vessel](#) found by Malaysian authorities in Penang on 20 April carrying 78 passengers.
- Around the same time, Reuters has since [reported](#) that Thai authorities opened an investigation into Rohingya smugglers in Thailand, based on a complaint filed by a Rohingya roti seller whose nephew was being held by the subordinates of a smuggler who was later reportedly arrested on 28 April.
- Individuals who had disembarked directly to Malaysia throughout April told UNHCR it was no longer possible to transit through Thailand and reported of drastic food shortages at sea as boats lingered off the Thai and Malaysian coasts without consistent supply lines. As smugglers attempted to pass off their losses, an increasing number of individuals said they had been transferred between as many as five vessels before being taken to shore.
- In late April, the Arakan Project warned of a “bottleneck” that was keeping thousands of people at sea on large holding ships due to smugglers' inability, in the face of increased scrutiny by authorities, to disembark passengers to either Thailand or Malaysia. Such holding ships were said to be steel-hulled vessels with eight or more levels that each held over 1,000 passengers.

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



Source: UNHCR / August 2015



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1 – 7 May

- On 1 May, Thai authorities discover five bodies next to a suspected smugglers' camp in the southern province of Songkhla. On 2 May, they find 21 more bodies [at the same site](#), then [six more](#) a few kilometers away. On 7 May, [30 new graves](#) are unearthed near another camp.
- Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha [orders](#) an immediate investigation into human trafficking networks in Thailand and that any remaining smuggling camps and graves must be found within 10 days.

9 May

- The Arakan Project reports that smugglers have abandoned several vessels, leaving potentially thousands stranded at sea. Persons of concern to UNHCR who later arrived in Indonesia on three separate boats said each of their boats were abandoned on or around 9 May. Smugglers and crews had consolidated passengers on to as few boats as possible in order to salvage the emptied boats and use them as well as speedboats to return to shore.

10 May

- A smugglers' boat runs aground in north Aceh, Indonesia, and 578 people disembark either by swimming to shore or floating in large cooking pots guided by others. Other than over 100 Bangladeshis [repatriated](#) in early August, most remain in temporary shelters in Lhokseumawe, Indonesia.

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Geutanyoe Foundation



578 passengers disembarked from this smugglers' boat after it ran aground in north Aceh, Indonesia, on 10 May 2015.

11 May

- Two smugglers' boats arrive in Langkawi, Malaysia, from which 1,107 passengers disembark, over 700 of whom are Bangladeshi nationals. Over the next few days, they are all [relocated](#) to Belantik Immigration Detention Centre in Kedah. Around 600 have since been [repatriated to Bangladesh](#), but the rest remain in detention. UNHCR was granted access to the detained persons of concern in early August.
- According to media and passenger accounts, a gray smugglers' boat carrying between 800-900 passengers is provided with food and water and then [towed](#) by Indonesian authorities towards Malaysia.

12 May

- 116 individuals are [rescued](#) by Bangladesh authorities from a smugglers' boat near St. Martin's Island, Bangladesh. All are reportedly Bangladeshi nationals.

13 May

- Malaysian authorities reportedly [turn away](#) two vessels: a gray vessel near Penang later determined to be the same one towed by Indonesian authorities on 11 May; and a green vessel near Langkawi later found to be carrying approximately 400 passengers.

14 May

- Journalists and Thai naval authorities find the green vessel floating between Koh Lipe and Koh Tarutao, Thailand.
- Fighting breaks out on the gray vessel off east Aceh, Indonesia, and it begins sinking. At least 14 people are believed to have died.
- Thai authorities find [106 people](#) on [an island in Phang Nga](#), Thailand, who said they were abandoned by smugglers two days earlier. They remain in shelters and detention facilities in southern Thailand.



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On 14 May 2015, Thai authorities dropped food for around 400 people stranded on this smugglers' boat.

- The UN Secretary-General [calls on governments](#) to uphold their rescue at sea and *non-refoulement* obligations.

15 May

- 820 passengers from the gray vessel are rescued by fishermen off east Aceh, Indonesia. Around 500 are Bangladeshi nationals, most of whom have since been repatriated, but over 200 others remain in temporary shelters in Langsa and Medan, Indonesia.
- Thai authorities reportedly repair the engine of the green vessel and escort it out to sea.
- Indonesian authorities [prevent](#) another boat carrying hundreds from [reaching](#) shore. It remains unaccounted for.

16 May

- The green vessel returns to Thai waters and is reportedly towed out by Thai authorities, [then intercepted](#) by Malaysian authorities. According to its passengers, the Malaysian authorities tow the green vessel towards Indonesia.

17 May

- Around 700 people are estimated to have discreetly disembarked in Rakhine State, Myanmar, in the previous week. Many are believed to have been stranded in the Bay of Bengal for weeks, if not months.

18 May

- Up to six boats carrying a total of over 2,000 passengers are said to still be at sea off St. Martin's Island, Bangladesh, and Maungdaw, Myanmar.

19 May

- The principals of UNHCR, OHCHR, and IOM, and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for International Migration and Development [jointly urge](#) countries in the region to search for and rescue refugees and migrants at sea, allow them to disembark, and protect their human rights.

20 May

- 409 passengers from the green vessel are rescued by fishermen off east Aceh, Indonesia. Over 300 of them remain in a temporary shelter in Langsa, Indonesia. Survivors say at least 10 people from their group died at sea.
- The foreign ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand meet in Putrajaya, Malaysia. Malaysia and Indonesia [agree](#) to offer “temporary shelter provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community.”

21 May

- The foreign ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar meet in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, on mixed migration flows in the region.
- Myanmar authorities [rescue](#) a boat carrying 208 passengers south of Maungdaw, Myanmar; up to 200 others are reported to have [disembarked](#) prior to the interception. Of the 208 passengers officially disembarked, 187 have been repatriated to Bangladesh.

24 May

- In the previous two weeks, dozens of bodies believed to be those of passengers from smugglers’ boats are [reportedly](#) found along the coast of Rakhine State, Myanmar.

25 May

- Malaysian authorities announce the [discovery](#) of 139 graves in over two dozen camps in Perlis, Malaysia.
- United States-Malaysia joint aerial surveillance missions over the Andaman Sea commence. They end on 13 June.

29 May

- Countries in the region convene in Bangkok for the Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean, and put forward [proposals](#) for immediate response, prevention of irregular migration, and addressing root causes.
- Myanmar authorities [rescue](#) 733 passengers on a smugglers’ boat southeast of Pyapon, Myanmar; 439 have been [repatriated](#) to Bangladesh, and nearly 200 have returned to their homes in Rakhine State, Myanmar.

30 May

- United States-Thailand joint aerial surveillance missions over the Andaman Sea commence. They end on 11 June.

30 June – 12 July

- Myanmar authorities [find 102 people](#) on an island in Tanintharyi Region, southeast Myanmar, who had reportedly been stranded there for almost one month.

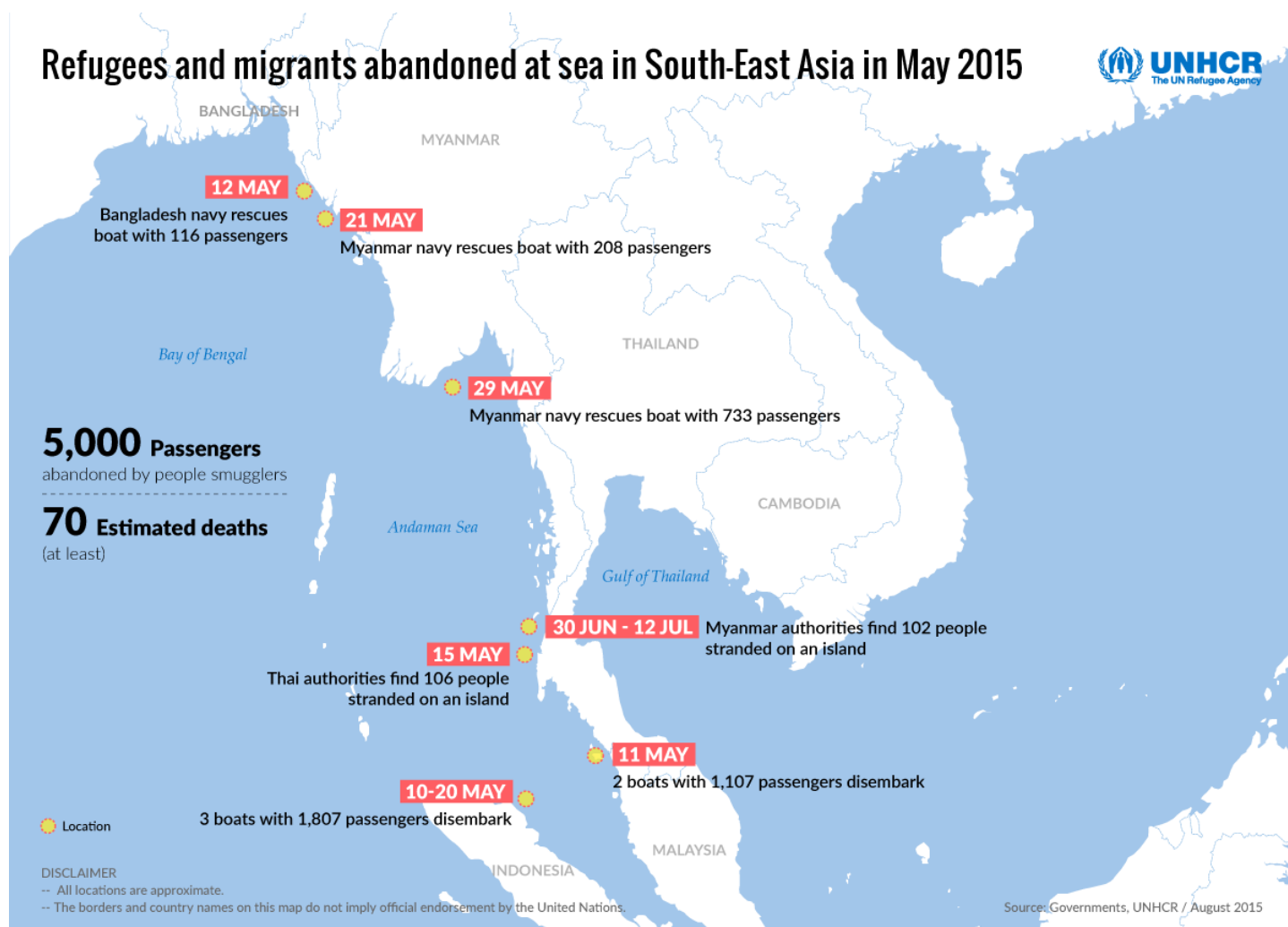
Profile of persons of concern to UNHCR who disembarked in Indonesia



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Among the **1,807** individuals who disembarked from three smugglers’ boats in Indonesia between 10-20 May, approximately **1,000** were persons of concern to UNHCR who identified themselves as Rohingya, **55%** of whom were under the age of 18.

UNHCR’s maritime monitoring unit interviewed over **600** such persons of concern. Interviewees spent an average of **76** days at sea, and on average paid or committed **USD 1,400** to smugglers. The total amount paid or committed to smugglers by all passengers on the three vessels that disembarked in Indonesia is estimated to be **USD 2.5 million**.



RESPONSE

- The events of May 2015 in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea generated interest at the highest levels of governments and the [United Nations](#). The foreign ministers of affected countries met on 20 and 21 May to address the issue, and heads of states from [around](#) the [world](#) commented on the events.
- The events also captured widespread media attention, though the dramatic increase in media coverage of mixed maritime movements in South-East Asia in May had just as quickly dissipated by July.
- In addition to [repeated calls](#) throughout May for the rescue and protection of refugees and migrants stranded at sea, UNHCR, UNODC, and IOM jointly submitted to countries in the region a [10-point plan of action](#) for how to address disembarkation, reception, and root causes.
- All five directly affected countries—Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand—participated in the 29 May Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean, along with 12 other countries in the region and UNHCR, UNODC, and IOM. Japan, Switzerland, and the United States also attended as observers. The meeting in Bangkok put forward [17 proposals and recommendations](#) to: provide immediate response and protection to stranded migrants; prevent irregular migration and human smuggling and trafficking; and address the root causes of such migration in countries of origin.

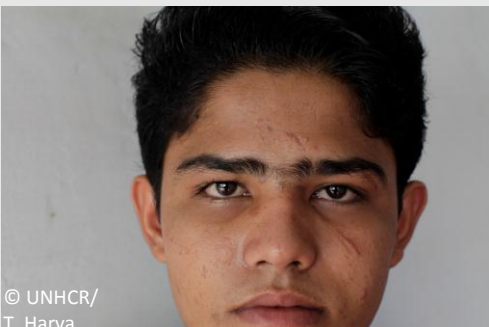
- On 2 July, in Kuala Lumpur, an Emergency ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime Concerning Irregular Movement of Persons in Southeast Asia [echoed](#) these proposals and recommendations, including the creation of a joint task force and trust fund to respond to the mixed movements of refugees and migrants.
- Implementation of most of the proposals and recommendations has yet to begin, including the establishment of a joint task force or other mechanism necessary to drive the proposals and recommendations forward.
- International [organizations](#) and [UN agencies](#) have launched funding appeals to implement their own respective responses to mixed migration in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. UNHCR has [appealed for](#) USD 13 million, of which 20 percent has now been funded with contributions from the governments of Japan (USD 1 million), Australia (USD 749,000), Norway (USD 446,000), the Republic of Korea (USD 100,000), and Bangladesh (USD 12,000), as well as a private contribution from the United Arab Emirates (USD 272,000).

NEXT STEPS

- The official and media attention garnered by the events of May have presented an unprecedented opportunity to address longstanding issues related to mixed maritime movements in South-East Asia that track the proposals and recommendations put forward at recent regional meetings. These include rescue at sea (followed by disembarkation, access, and protection), safe legal alternatives for migration, and how to address root causes.
- An upcoming event on migration at the UN General Assembly (in September), a follow-up meeting to the August 2013 Jakarta Declaration (in November), and a Bali Process Ministerial Meeting (in early 2016) will provide high-profile forums to improve preparedness for any future maritime crises in the region.

Faces of a crisis – Ali~

After smugglers abandoned the gray ship Ali was aboard, a fight broke out over what little drinking water remained. Ali was thrashed across the side of his face with a wooden plank, ripping a trail of skin from above his eyebrow down to his cheek.



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T. Harva

The ship was damaged in the fighting, and as it sank, Ali was rescued by fishermen near Aceh, Indonesia, on 15 May. At least 14 passengers from the ship are believed to have died from the fighting or drowning.

Faces of a crisis – Aisha~

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Aisha was born in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. She wanted nothing more than to learn English, but as a teenager, she had aged out of the limited schooling available in the camp. “People who speak English are educated,” she said. “And people who are educated don’t have to suffer.”

Aisha disembarked from a smugglers’ boat in Aceh, Indonesia, on 10 May, by climbing into a large cooking pot bobbing in the water.

~All names have been changed for protection reasons

- Neither existing regional mechanisms, such as the Bali Process, nor proposed mechanisms, such as a joint task force, are currently in a position to adequately respond to such crises. Other proposals suggested by governments in the region, such as mass resettlement, are reminiscent of the 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indo-Chinese Refugees and are no longer sustainable options for the region.
- UNHCR will continue supporting governments in the region in enhancing their operational response capacity for rescue at sea and predictable disembarkation and reception options.

- UNHCR will also monitor whether previous or new smuggling routes materialize in September, as they have in past years following the end of the rainy season, and is exploring the possibility of using satellite imagery to identify smugglers' boats in the waters they have been known to frequent, such as those off St. Martin's Island, Bangladesh; Ranong, Thailand; and Langkawi, Malaysia.

BEYOND THE BAY OF BENGAL

- In late May, Australian authorities intercepted a vessel carrying 65 passengers from Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Passengers interviewed by UNHCR said they were transferred to a separate vessel and returned to Indonesian territory, where they ran aground on 30 May. They claimed Australian authorities paid the boat crew to return them to Indonesia and [Indonesian officials said](#) the payments amounted to USD 5,000 per crew, but the Australian government has neither confirmed nor denied these allegations with UNHCR.
- On 6 August, the Australian Minister for Immigration and Border Protection [announced](#) that since December 2013, Australian authorities have intercepted at sea and returned 633 people "aboard 20 ventures to their countries of departure". UN agencies such as [UNHCR](#) and [OHCHR](#) have repeatedly expressed their concerns that such operations may not comply with Australia's *non-refoulement* obligations.
- As of 30 June 2015, over 5,100 persons of concern to UNHCR who travelled by sea were held in immigration detention facilities in the Asia-Pacific region, including over 2,600 who are either in Australia or the offshore processing centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. UNHCR remains concerned about the growing use of immigration detention and seeks to end the detention of children, offer alternatives to detention, and improve conditions of detention when necessary through its "[Global Strategy – Beyond Detention 2014-2019](#)".

Faces of a crisis – Roshid~



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With no food or water left on board, Roshid and three others decided to swim for help. It had been several days since the crew of their green fishing trawler had abandoned ship, and at least eight passengers had already died. All they had on board that could give Roshid and the three other swimmers a shot of energy were raw chili peppers. No rice, not a gulp of water. So they ground a bowlful of chilies into a paste, swallowed, and jumped into the sea.

"Most people were telling us not to," said Roshid. *But we're half dead already*, he thought. If not in the sea, he was going to die on the boat. They might as well try. "Otherwise everyone would die," he said. "Including us." Roshid was rescued by fishermen near Aceh, Indonesia, on 20 May.

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Links:

UNHCR-UNODC-IOM, Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea – Proposals for Action: <http://www.unhcr.org/55682d3b6.html>

UNHCR, Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea Initiative – Enhancing Responses and Seeking Solutions: <http://www.unhcr.org/557ad6a59.html>