

THE WAR ON THE ROHINGYAS

THE UNWANTED: Rohingya Muslim refugees at an immigration detention center in southern Thailand. They have no citizenship in Myanmar where they are fleeing bloody conflict.

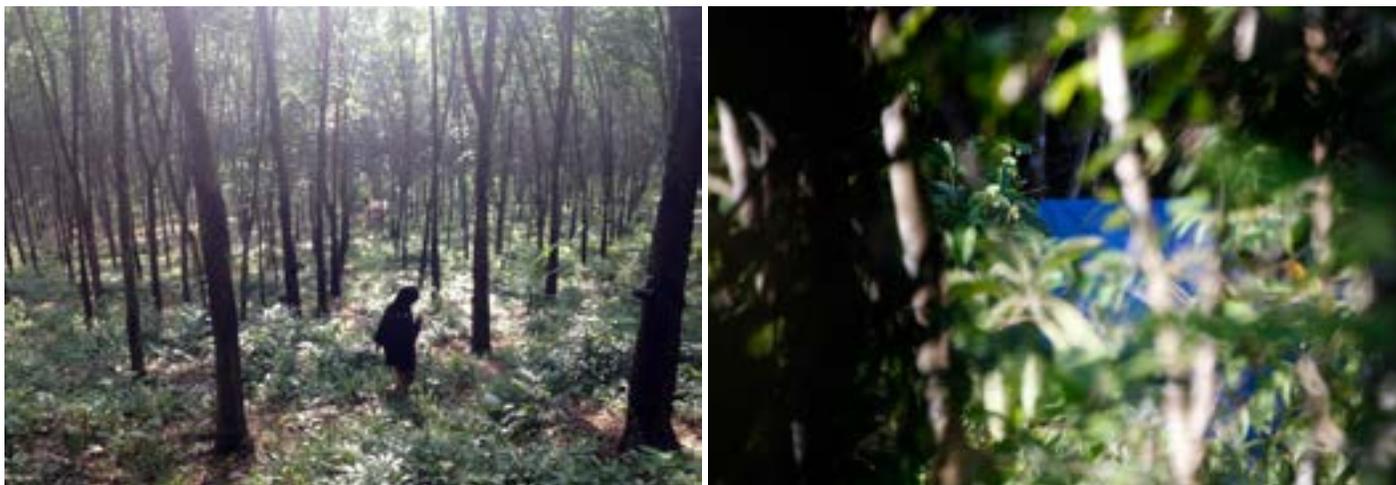
REUTERS/ATHIT PERAWONGMETHA

A Reuters investigation finds that Thai authorities are secretly dumping Myanmar refugees into human trafficking rings.

Thailand secretly supplies Rohingyas to trafficking rings

BY JASON SZEP AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

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SECRET TRAFFICKING CAMPS: A villager walks through a rubber plantation towards a secret human trafficking camp. A blue tent seen through the trees marks the site of the camp. **REUTERS/JASON SZEP/ATHIT PERAWONGMETHA**

One afternoon in October, in the watery no-man’s land between Thailand and Myanmar, Muhammad Ismail vanished.

Thai immigration officials said he was being deported to Myanmar. In fact, they sold Ismail, 23, and hundreds of other Rohingya Muslims to human traffickers, who then spirited them into brutal jungle camps.

As thousands of Rohingya flee Myanmar to escape religious persecution, a Reuters investigation in three countries has uncovered a clandestine policy to remove Rohingya refugees from Thailand’s immigration detention centers and deliver them to human traffickers waiting at sea.

The Rohingya are then transported across southern Thailand and held hostage in a series of camps hidden near the border with Malaysia until relatives pay thousands of dollars to release them. Reporters located three such camps – two based on the testimony of Rohingya held there, and a third by trekking to the site, heavily guarded, near a village called Baan Klong Tor.

Thousands of Rohingya have passed through this tropical gulag. An untold number have died there. Some have been murdered by camp guards or have perished from dehydration or disease, survivors said in interviews.

The Thai authorities say the movement of Rohingya through their country doesn’t amount to human trafficking. But in interviews for this story, the Thai Royal Police acknowledged, for the first time, a covert policy called “option two” that relies upon established human-smuggling networks to rid Thailand of Rohingya detainees.

Ismail was one of five Rohingya who said that Thai immigration officials had sold him outright or aided in their sale to human traffickers. “It seemed so official at first,” said Ismail, a wiry farmer with a long narrow face and tight curly hair. “They took our photographs. They took our fingerprints. And then once in the boats, about 20 minutes out at sea, we were told we had been sold.”

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Muhammad Ismail

Myanmar Rohingya sold to human traffickers

THE ROHINGYA EXODUS

● Rohingya camps

To escape religious persecution in Myanmar, thousands of Rohingya have fled the country, seeking refuge in Thailand. However, a Reuters investigation found that Thai authorities are removing Rohingya refugees from its immigration detention centers and delivering them to human traffickers.

The Rohingya are transported across southern Thailand and held hostage in a series of camps hidden near the border with Malaysia until relatives pay the ransom for their release.

Source: Reuters.



Ismail said he ended up in a camp in southern Thailand. So did Bozor Mohamed, a Rohingya whose frail body makes him seem younger than his 21 years. The camp was guarded by men with guns and clubs, said Mohamed, and at least one person died every day due to dehydration or disease.

“I used to be a strong man,” the former rice farmer said in an interview, as he massaged his withered legs.

Mohamed and others say they endured hunger, filth and multiple beatings. Mohamed’s elbow and back are scarred from what he said were beatings administered by his captors in Thailand while he telephoned his brother-in-law in Malaysia, begging him to pay the \$2,000 ransom they demanded. Some men failed to find a benefactor in Malaysia to pay their ransom. The camp became their home. “They had long beards and their hair was so long, down to the middle of their backs, that they looked liked women,” said Mohamed.



PHONY DEPORTATIONS: Thai immigration authorities put Rohingyas on boats near the Thai port city of Ranong to send them back to Myanmar. Instead they end up being sold at the maritime border to human traffickers. **REUTERS/ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL**

“HOLDING BAYS”

What ultimately happens to Rohingya who can’t buy their freedom remains unclear. A Thai-based smuggler said some are sold to shipping companies and farms as manual laborers for 5,000 to 50,000 baht each, or \$155 to \$1,550.

“Prices vary according to their skills,” said the smuggler, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group based in Thailand, says it has interviewed scores of Rohingya who have passed through the Thai camps and into Malaysia. Many Rohingya who can’t pay end up as cooks or guards at the camps, said Chris Lewa, Arakan Project’s director.

Presented with the findings of this report, Thailand’s second-highest-ranking policeman made some startling admissions. Thai officials might have profited from Rohingya smuggling in the past, said Police Maj-Gen Chatchawal Suksomjit, Deputy Commissioner General of the Royal Thai Police. He also confirmed the existence of illegal camps in southern Thailand, which he called “holding bays”.

Tarit Pengdith, chief of the Department of Special Investigation, Thailand’s equivalent of the U.S. FBI, was also asked about the camps Reuters discovered. “We have heard about these camps in southern Thailand,” he said, “but we are not investigating this issue.”

Besieged by a political crisis and violent street protests this week, Thailand faces difficult questions about its future and global status. Among those is whether it will join North Korea, the Central African Republic and Iran among the world’s worst offenders in fighting human trafficking.

The signs are not good.

The U.S. State Department’s annual Trafficking In Persons (TIP) report ranks countries on their record for combating the crime. For the past four years, Thailand has sat on the TIP Report’s so-called Tier 2 Watch List,



SECRET POLICY: A poster outside a Thai immigration center in the port city of Ranong warns against human trafficking. The truck is taking Myanmar refugees to boats at the nearby pier, where many will wind up in the hands of human traffickers. **REUTERS/ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL**

the second-lowest rank. It will be automatically downgraded to Tier 3 next year unless it makes what the State Department calls “significant efforts” to eliminate human trafficking.

Dropping to Tier 3 status theoretically carries the threat of U.S. sanctions. In practice, the United States is unlikely to sanction Thailand, one of its oldest treaty allies in Asia. But to be downgraded would be a major embarrassment to Thailand, which is now lobbying hard for a non-permanent position on the United Nations Security Council.

THE ROHINGYA EXODUS

Rohingya are Muslims from Myanmar and Bangladesh, where they are usually stateless and despised as illegal immigrants. In 2012, two eruptions of violence between Rohingyas and majority Buddhists in Rakhine State in western Myanmar killed at least 192 people and made 140,000 homeless. Most were Rohingyas, who live in wretched camps or under apartheid-like segregation with little access to healthcare, schools or jobs.

And so they have fled Myanmar by sea in unprecedented numbers over the past year. Ismail and Mohamed joined tens of thousands of Rohingyas in one of the biggest movements of boat people since the end of the Vietnam War.

Widespread bias against the Rohingyas in the region, however, makes it difficult for them to find safe haven – and easy to fall into the hands of traffickers. “No one is there to speak for them,” says Phil Robertson, deputy director for Asia at Human Rights Watch. “They are a lost people.”

Rohingya men, women and children squeeze aboard overloaded fishing boats and cargo ships to cross the Bay of Bengal. Their desired destination is Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country where at least 31,000 Rohingyas already live. As Reuters reported in July, many of these refugees were waylaid in Thailand, where the Thai navy and marine police worked with smugglers to extract money for their onward trip to Malaysia.

Hundreds of Rohingyas were arrested in two headline-grabbing raids by the Thai authorities on Jan. 9 in the towns of Padang Besar and Sadao, both near the Malaysia border. At the time, Colonel Krissakorn Paleetunyawong, deputy commander of police in the area, declared the Rohingyas would be deported back to

Myanmar. That never happened.

Ismail and Mohamed were among the 393 Rohingya that Thai police say were arrested that day in Padang Besar. So was Ismail's friend Ediris, 22. The three young men all hailed from Buthedaung, a poor township in northern Rakhine State.

Their story reveals how Thailand, a rapidly developing country in the heart of Southeast Asia, shifted from cracking down on human trafficking camps to facilitating them.

A SECRET POLICY

After their arrest, Ediris and Ismail were brought to an immigration detention center (IDC) in Sadao, where they joined another 300 Rohingya rounded up from a nearby smuggler's house. The two-story IDC, designed for a few dozen inmates, was overflowing. Women and children were moved to sheltered housing, while some men were sent to other IDCs across Thailand.

With about 1,700 Rohingya locked up nationwide, the Thai government set a July deadline to deport them all and opened talks with Myanmar on how to do it. The talks went nowhere, because the Myanmar government refused to take responsibility for what it regards as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Men and teenage boys languished for months in cramped, cage-like cells, often with barely enough room to sit or stand, much less walk. In June, Reuters journalists visited an IDC in Phang Nga, near the tourist Mecca of Phuket. There were 269 men and boys crammed into a space built for no more than 100. It reeked of urine and sweat. Some detainees used crutches because their muscles had atrophied.

A doctor who inspected Sadao's IDC in July said he found five emaciated Rohingya clinging to life. Two died on their way to hospital, said the doctor, Anatachai Thaipratan, an advisor of the Thai Islamic Medical Association.

As the plight of Rohingya detainees made world headlines, pressure mounted on Thailand. But Myanmar wouldn't take them, nor would Malaysia. With thousands more arriving, the U.N.'s refugee agency issued an urgent appeal for alternative housing. The government proposed building a "mega camp" in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, another province in southern Thailand. It was rejected after an outcry from local people.

In early August, 270 Rohingya rioted at the IDC in Phang Nga. Men tore off doors separating cells, demanding to be let outside to pray at the close of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Over the last three weeks of August, more than 300 Rohingya fled from five detention centers.

By this time, Mohamed, the 21-year-old refugee, could no longer walk, let alone escape. His leg muscles had wasted away from months in detention in a cell shared by 95 Rohingya men. Ismail and Ediris were shuttled between various IDCs, ending up in Nong Khai, a city on Thailand's northern border with Laos.

Thailand saw its options rapidly dwindling, a senior government official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. It couldn't protest to Myanmar's government to improve the lives of Rohingya and stem the exodus,



PREFERRED DESTINATION: Bozor Mohamed now lives in Malaysia's capital of Kuala Lumpur after he escaped a human trafficking camp in southern Thailand. Most Myanmar Rohingyas are trying to get to Muslim-majority Malaysia. **REUTERS/SAMSUL SAID**

the official said. That could ruffle diplomatic feathers and even jeopardize the access of Thai companies hoping to invest in Myanmar, one of the world's hottest frontier markets.

Nor could Thailand arrest, prosecute and jail the Rohingya for breaking Thai immigration law – there were simply too many of them. “There would be no room in our prison cells,” Police Maj-Gen Chatchawal said.

That growing problem gave birth to “option two” in October, a secret policy to deport the refugees back to Myanmar that led to Rohingyas being sold to human trafficking networks.

A hint of the policy shift came weeks earlier, on Sept. 13, when Police Lt. Gen. Panu Kerdlarppol, chief of the Immigration Bureau, met with officials from other agencies on the resort island of Koh Samui to decide what to do with the Rohingya. Afterwards, Kerdlarppol announced that immigration authorities would take statements from the Rohingya “to arrange their deportation” and see if any want to go home. Arrangements would be made for those who did.

By early October, 2,058 Rohingya were held in 14 IDCs across Thailand, according to the Internal Security Operations Command, a national security agency run by the Thai military. A month later, that number stood at about 600, according to non-governmental organizations and Muslim aid workers. By the first week of December, it was 154, Thailand's immigration department said.

Rohingya were fast disappearing from Thailand's IDCs, and nobody knew where they were going.

“WE NOW BELONGED TO THEM”

Central to the policy was Ranong, a sparsely populated Thai province whose geography has always made it a smugglers' paradise. Ranong shares a long, ill-policed land and sea border with Myanmar. Its coastline is blanketed in dense mangrove forest and dotted with small, often uninhabited islands.

The provincial capital, also called Ranong, was built on tin mining but now lives off fishing and tourism. Rust-streaked trawlers from Thailand and Burma ply the same waters as dive boats and yachts. So do wooden “long-tail” boats, named after their extended drive-shafts, which ferry Burmese migrant workers to the Myanmar port of Kawthaung, only a 30-minute voyage away.

By late October, hundreds of Rohingya were being packed onto immigration trucks and driven to Ranong for processing and deportation. Among them were Ismail and Ediris, who arrived in the port city after a grueling, standing room-only journey of 1,200 km (746 miles) from Nong Khai.

At Ranong's IDC, they were photographed and told by Thai immigration officers they were being sent back to Myanmar. “They said no other countries were accepting Rohingya, and Myanmar had become peaceful,” said Ismail.

Then they were driven to a Ranong pier and herded onto four long-tail boats, each with a three-man crew of Thais and Burmese. Once at sea, the Rohingya asked the boat driver to help them. The Burmese-speaking driver shook his head and told the Rohingya they had been sold by Thai immigration officials for 11,000 baht (\$350) each.

“They told us we now belonged to them,” said Ismail.

After about 30 minutes at sea, the boats stopped. It was early afternoon on Oct. 23. The vessels waited until about 6 p.m., when a large fishing boat arrived. They were loaded aboard and sailed through the night until they reached a jungle island, separated from the mainland by a narrow river. It was about 4 a.m.

Ismail said he saw about 200 other Rohingya in that camp, mostly sleeping and guarded by men with guns.

The guards shoved Ismail and the others into a muddy clearing. There was no water or food. He was told he must pay 60,000 Thai baht (\$1,850). Did he have family who could send the money? If he did, he could go wherever he wanted, Ismail said he was told. “If you don’t, we’ll use this,” one guard said, showing an iron rod.

Ismail had some cash but not enough. “We need to escape,” he whispered to Ediris. After an hour at the camp, just before dawn, the two men made their move. A guard fired shots in the air as they ran through the jungle and waded through a river to reach the mainland. For the next 24 hours, they survived by drinking stream-water and eating the bark of banana trees. They emerged onto a rubber plantation, their feet lacerated from the bare-foot jungle trek, and met a Burmese man who promised to spirit them into Malaysia for 8,000 baht, or \$250, each.

They agreed and were driven to a house in southern Thailand, where Reuters interviewed them hours before they were smuggled by pick-up across the Malaysian border.

THE JUNGLE CAMPS

Bozor Mohamed, the third young Rohingya from Buthedaung, said he was held for 10 days at a jungle camp in Padang Besar.

He, too, said he had been delivered by Thai officials to trafficking boats along the maritime border with Myanmar. Afterwards, in torrential rain and under cover of darkness, along with perhaps 200 other Rohingya, Mohamed said he was ferried back across the strait to Thailand, where a new ordeal began.

The men were taken on a two-day journey by van, motor-bike, and foot to a smuggler’s camp on the border with Malaysia. On the final hike, men with canes beat the young Rohingya and the others, many of them hobbled by months of detention. They stumbled and dragged themselves up steep forested hills.

Making the same trek was Mohamed Hassan, a fourth Rohingya to escape Thailand’s trafficking network. Hassan is a baby-faced 19-year-old from the Rakhine capital of Sittwe.

He said he arrived at the camp in September after an overnight journey in a pick-up truck, followed by a two-hour walk into the hills with dozens of other Rohingya. Their captors ordered them to carry supplies, he said. Already giddy with fatigue and hunger after eight days at sea, the 19-year-old shouldered a sack of rice. “If we stopped, the men beat us with sticks,” he said.

The camp was partially skirted by a barbed-wire fence, he said, and guarded by about 25 men with guns, knives and clubs. Hassan reckoned it held about 300 Rohingya. They slept on plastic sheets, unprotected from the sun and rain, and were allowed only one meal a day, of rice and dried fish. He said he was constantly hungry.

One night, two Rohingya men tried to escape. The guards tracked them down, bound their hands and



ETHNIC CONFLICT: Violence between majority Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar first erupted in June 2012, destroying this neighbourhood in the Rakhine state capital of Sittwe.

REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

dragged them back to camp. Then, the guards beat the two men with clubs, rods and lengths of rubber. “Everybody watched,” said Hassan. “We said nothing. Some people were crying.”

The beating lasted some 30 minutes, he said. Then a guard drew a small knife and slit the throat of one of the fugitives.

The prisoners were ordered to dispose of his corpse in the forest. The other victim was dumped in a stream. Afterwards, Hassan vomited with fear and exhaustion, but tried not to cry. “When I cried they beat me. I had already decided that I would die there.”

His only hope of release was his older brother, 42, a long-time resident of Thailand. Hassan said he had his brother’s telephone number with him, but at first his captors wouldn’t let him call it. (Traffickers are reluctant to deal with relatives in Thailand, in case they have contacts with the Thai authorities that could jeopardize operations.)

Eventually, Hassan reached his brother, who said he sold his motorbike to help raise the equivalent of about \$3,000 to secure Hassan’s freedom, after 20 days in the camp.

Reporters were able to trace the location of three trafficking camps, based on the testimony of Rohingya who previously were held in them.

Three journalists traveled on motor-bikes and then hiked through rubber plantations and dense jungle to directly confirm the existence of a major camp near Baan Klong Tor.

Concealed by a blue tarpaulin tent, the Rohingya were split into groups of men and women. Some prayed. The encampment was patrolled by armed guards and protected by villagers and police. The reporters didn’t attempt to enter. Villagers who have visited the camp said the number of people held inside ranged from an estimated 500 to a thousand or more, depending on the number of people arriving, departing or escaping.

Interviews with about a dozen villagers also confirmed two other large camps: one less than a mile away, and another in Padang Besar, near the Malaysia border.

“THAT RED LINE IN THE SEA”

Major General Chatchawal of the Royal Thai Police in Bangkok admitted there was an unofficial policy to deport the Rohingya to Myanmar. He called this “a natural way or option two.” But he said the Rohingya went voluntarily.

“Some Rohingya in our IDCs can’t stand being in limbo, so they ask to return to where they came from,” said Chatchawal. “This means going back to Myanmar.” Rohingya at the IDCs, for instance, sign statements in the presence of a local Islamic leader, in which they agree they want to return to Myanmar.

These statements, however, were at times produced in the absence of a Rohingya language translator. When



NUMBERED: Rohingya Muslims, wearing numbered shirts that identify them for officials, pray at an immigration detention center in southern Thailand. The camps are fast emptying under Thailand’s policy of deporting them back to Myanmar. Many instead are sold to traffickers.

REUTERS/ATHIT PERAWONGMETHA

reporters visited the Sadao IDC for this story, the translator was a Muslim from Myanmar who spoke only Thai and Burmese, and thus unable to explain what the detainees were signing.

Chatchawal was also presented with recent testimony from Rohingya who said they weren't taken to back to Myanmar. Instead, they were put in boats by Thai immigration officials, told they had been sold and taken under duress to Thailand's camps. Reporters interviewed four Rohingya for this story who said they fell prey to trafficking with official complicity.

At the house where Ediris and Ismail were interviewed were two other survivors of the trafficking camps: Abdul Basser, 24, and Fir Mohamed, 28. They told similar stories. Both were arrested after arriving in Thailand on Jan. 25, and held at the overcrowded Phang Nga IDC for about eight months. On Oct. 17, the two men, along with dozens of other Rohingya, were driven overnight to Ranong.

"We were told we could go back to Myanmar," said Mohamed.

That day, 48 Rohingya and five Buddhist Burmese were loaded into trucks and driven to a pier. The five Burmese were put on one boat; the Rohingya were put on another. After about a half hour at sea, the captain cut the engine. "We thought the engine had stalled or broke down," said Basser. "The captain told us we could not go back to Myanmar, that we had been sold by the immigration and police," he added.

Mohamed and Basser, too, escaped after being brought to an island near mainland Thailand.

Until now, the Thai government has denied official complicity in the smuggling or trafficking of Rohingya. But in a break with that position, Chatchawal said Thai officials might have received money previously in exchange for Rohingya, but not anymore. "In the past, and I stress in the past, there may have been cases of officials taking payments for handing over migrants to boats," he said. "I am not ruling it out, but I don't know of any specific cases recently."

He said it was possible the Rohingya were intercepted by brokers and never made it to Myanmar. "Once they've crossed that border, that red line in the sea, they are Myanmar's responsibility," he said.

He also admitted the camps uncovered by Reuters exist in breach of Thai laws. He referred to them as "temporary shelters" for a people who ultimately want to reach Malaysia. The smugglers who run the camps "extort money from Rohingya" but police don't accept bribes from them, he said.

As for the trafficking way stations in Padang Besar and Sadao, Chatchawal said: "I do believe there could be more camps like these. They could be hidden deep in the jungle."

(Additional reporting by Jutaret Skulpichetrat and Amy Sawitta Lefevre in Bangkok, and Stuart Grudgings in Kuala Lumpur. Editing by Michael Williams and Bill Tarrant)