

HUMAN-TRAFFICKING

Thai man on a mission

BBC ONLINE

Manit Pianthong, district chief of Takua Pa in South Thailand, got the job nine months ago. But he is all too familiar with the human trafficking which goes on along the indented coastline of Takua Pa.

Pianthong says he is trying to curb all forms of smuggling, but he is focusing in particular on the human trade, which he says is damaging the image of the entire country.

He encourages people in fishing communities along the coast to alert him to any signs of large groups of people being held. That is how he heard about these three groups of mainly Bangladeshi men, and a few Rohingyas.

The first group of 37 was found last month. Then, on October 11, his men tracked down another group of 53.

The last group, of 81, was surrounded in a forest camp near the road

on October 13. They had been driven by their guards from one camp to another in an attempt to evade the authorities. Pianthong believes many more were not rescued, and may have been sold.

Two of the guards have now been detained. One of them was identified by the Bangladeshi as the most brutal of their captors, a man they called Keke.

Whether this man and his bosses will be brought to justice, depends on the government in Bangkok.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

Pianthong said he wants to go after the trafficking kingpins in the region, people with powerful connections. But that would require him to get much stronger backing, and so far that is not happening.

Senior figures in the police and the social welfare ministry are resisting efforts to have all the Bangladeshi men

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Manit Pianthong, chief of Takua Pa district in South Thailand, talking to officials.

PHOTO: BBC

Modern-day slave trade unearthed

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they willingly travelled by boats to go to Malaysia.

"Human traffickers lure these people with promise of jobs in Malaysia. But in case they [jobseekers] fail to make it to Malaysia, they [the traffickers] offload them in the coastal border of Thailand," he said.

His statements clarify how slave traders have found a happy hunting ground in Bangladesh as people desperately looking for a livelihood are easily lured with the enticement of jobs abroad, and then they are kidnapped, put on wooden boats to be sailed off to Thailand.

Thailand is increasingly becoming infamous for human trafficking. In 2009, the Thai Navy was found to be towing boats packed with Rohingyas out to the sea, and leaving them to drift. Hundreds are believed to have died.

More recently, the Thai police and military personnel have been accused of selling Rohingyas who washed up on Thailand's shores to human traffickers.

These abuses are in part what caused Thailand to be downgraded to the lowest rank in the annual US report on human trafficking.

THE ORDEAL

The BBC reports that 81 of the kidnapped men are now being sheltered in a local government hall in the town of Takua Pa. They sit there listlessly, some nursing ugly wounds inflicted by their captors.

At times, tears slide down their faces as they recall their ordeal, and think of homes and families in Bangladesh. They all tell very similar stories.

Eighteen-year-old Abdur Rahim still hobbles from a savage blow to his

knee inflicted by one of his guards after he asked for more food, an investigative report of the BBC said.

Originally from Bogra, in northern Bangladesh, he said he was trying to find work in Dhaka when an elderly man offered him a job paying around \$6 (Tk 450) a day.

He travelled with this man to Cox's Bazaar, he said, and was taken to a small house up in the hills. There he was tied up, drugged, and then he woke up on board a boat. He spent seven or eight days at sea, where he was repeatedly beaten.

After that, the group was unloaded on the Thai coast, and taken to a camp hidden in a mangrove forest. "They gave us no food," he said, "We survived by eating leaves."

Abas Mia is 27, from Teknaf, close to the border with Myanmar. He is married with three young children.

"My heart is burning for home."

"All I think about is how I can get home, how I can see my mother again, how I can see my little boys and girl again. That's why I'm crying."

He described being offered a job by a man, and was waiting for him on a hill near Teknaf. Suddenly he was grabbed, his hands tied, his mouth gagged. He said he struggled as he was taken out to a boat, and was beaten.

Ayub was working as an agricultural labourer in Chittagong, southeast Bangladesh, but he said the work ran out. A man suggested he go to Cox's Bazaar. There he suddenly found himself being grabbed, tied up and forced onto a boat which he said was already crowded with people.

He repeatedly asked where they were taking him, but said the guards threatened to kill him if he did not shut up. He, too, has three children.

ALONG-DRAWN STORY

The first group of 37 who were forcibly kept in the jungle was found last month. Then, on 11 October, another group of 53 was tracked down, the BBC says.

The last group, of 81, was surrounded in a forest camp near the road on 13 October. They had been driven by their guards from one camp to another in an attempt to evade the authorities.

Two of the guards have now been detained. One of them was identified by the Bangladeshi as the most brutal of their captors, a man they called Keke.

Whether this man and his bosses will be brought to justice, depends on the government in Bangkok.

Senior figures in the Thai police and the social welfare ministry are resisting efforts to have all the Bangladeshi men classified as victims of trafficking.

The second group of 53 has already been given that status, which gives them proper support and shelter, and would allow them to return to Bangladesh quickly.

However, the police are talking about reversing that decision. Instead, they want them to be jailed as illegal immigrants.

It is difficult to know why they want this outcome for people who have all the appearance of victims.

Perhaps it is to avoid having to admit that trafficking continues in Thailand. Perhaps it is because they are reluctant to go after the trafficking kingpins.

The result, though, could be disastrous for the Bangladeshi. People have been known to be stuck in Thai immigration prisons for many years. In the case of Rohingyas, some were actually sold back to human traffickers.

Lured to sea of dangers

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driving a three-wheeler -- Nasimons.

When he decided to search for a job to "turn their fortune", his dream resonated with six others from his district. So, when a local manpower broker approached them with the prospect of good jobs in Malaysia, they didn't waste time to accept, knowing they were taking the illegal way.

Each of them paid the broker Tk 2.5 lakh and travelled to Dhaka and then to Teknaf in Cox's Bazar. There, the number of the fortune seekers rose to 90.

With six to seven brokers, the trawler left Teknaf on a December night.

While they were given loaves of dehydrated bread, banana and a small amount of drinking water during their five-day journey, the ration reduced to dried bread, puffed rice and even smaller quantity of water

twice a day during their captivity in the jungle, Sabuj recalled.

Separating the victims, the traffickers took away their mobile phones making them unable to communicate with anyone.

"The fear of death was constant. We could not sleep or feel the hunger. Also worrying about the future of my family, I could not help crying sometimes. The captors would beat me up if I cried," Shah Poran, another victim from Narsingdi, told The Daily Star.

With their dreams shattered, the victims only prayed for rescue.

Twenty-six days into their captivity, Thai police rescued around 400 abductees, almost all Bangladeshi, from the jungle and sent them to detention centres. Another 300 were rescued until the middle of this month.

On information from the Thai foreign ministry, Bangladeshi

embassy in Bangkok freed and sent back home around 300 Bangladeshi including Sabuj and Poran till date.

NETWORK OF BROKERS

Most of the jobseekers who took the illegal sea journey to Malaysia but were caught later over the last few months are from Faridpur, Narsingdi, Sylhet, Jhansi, Sirajganj and Narayanganj, according to Bangladesh embassy officials.

"But they come from all districts," said Ehteshamul Haque of the Bangladesh embassy who had talked to the victims at detention centres after their rescue.

The brokers, however, are mainly based in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, and many of them have their own trawlers.

According to law enforcers in Cox's Bazar, around 8,000 to 10,000 Bangladeshi use the sea route to reach Malaysia illegally every year.

Return too complicated

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The time of repatriation depends on how fast the Bangladesh police can verify the information given by the detained nationals and report to the embassy so that it can arrange their return, Ehteshamul added.

According to the embassy officials, some 400 Bangladeshi are languishing in different detention centres in the Southeast Asian country.

The embassy sends the statements of the detainees to the foreign ministry that then passes those to the home

ministry. The home ministry asks the police of the districts concerned to verify the information.

Currently, the home ministry is overseeing the verification of information given by 253 self-claimed Bangladeshi held at different detention centres in Thailand.

"We have completed the procedure for 213 detainees till August. Of them, six or seven were found to be non-Bangladeshi. They might be Rohingyas," said an official of the home ministry yesterday.

Sometimes confusion arises

over detainees' nationalities when Rohingyas identify themselves as Bangladeshi, Ehteshamul said.

Binoy Krishna Mallick, executive director of Rights Jhansi that works for victims of trafficking, said the repatriation from Thailand of such victims had taken longer time.

Promptness of the Bangladesh embassy officials, foreign ministry and home ministry are important in this regard, he said.

"This, however, does not happen," Mallick told The Daily Star.

Ebola mission unaccomplished

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concluded cholera might be the culprit. Ebola wasn't confirmed until March 21. By the end of the month, it had spread to Liberia.

In April, Doctors Without Border warned that the outbreak was out of control, but a WHO spokesman insisted it wasn't. In May, the funeral of a traditional healer in Sierra Leone spread the virus to hundreds of people.

"It was a turning point. It refueled the epidemic in Guinea and it was the start of major epidemics in Liberia and Sierra Leone," said Dr. Peter Piot, discoverer of the Ebola virus and director of London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Little went smoothly. WHO's Guinea office was accused of not helping a team of experts get visas to that country. Some \$500,000 in aid was held up by red tape.

In early July, Piot "called for a state of emergency to be declared and for military operations to be deployed," he said.

It didn't happen.

HOW COUNTRIES FELL SHORT

In Guinea, the ministry of health at first would give WHO information only on lab-confirmed Ebola cases, hampering the investigation. Messages to the public about the lethal nature of the disease discouraged people from seeking treatment. When masked teams arrived to disinfect hot zones, people thought they were spraying toxic chemicals and attacked them.

Early international aid was mishandled. Guinean President Alpha Conde set up a panel with the ministers of health, communications and social affairs to fight the disease, but the minister of health couldn't formulate an effective strategy and little money was dispersed. Finally, a new committee of independent experts was appointed and funds began to flow.

In Liberia, early government messages stressed that Ebola had no cure, so sick people saw little reason to go to a hospital, and the disease spread even more. In August, the government quarantined

On January 27, local health officials and Doctors Without Borders missed a chance to diagnose Ebola after seeing bacteria in blood samples — they

Prosperity helps cut terrorism

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celebrate its 110th founding anniversary.

Kalam, who served as India's 11th president from 2002 to 2007, said terrorism is increasing. "Terrorism is international nowadays and comes in different forms."

But every nation should make some sort of study to know why some people tend to go against the system, he said after presenting his paper, where he shared his World Vision 2030 to ensure sustainable development.

He also laid out ideas of providing urban amenities in rural areas of Saarc nations to empower impoverished people and aspire to see creative leadership for people's empowerment.

The scientist, recognising the current global challenges and manifestations, said he visualised a world that is prosperous, healthy, secure, devoid of terrorism, peaceful and happy, and continues with a sustainable growth path.

Discussing his vision for the world in 10 points, he said he dreams of a world of nations, where the division between rural and urban, rich and poor, developed and developing countries has narrowed; a world where there is an equitable distribution and adequate access to energy and safe drinking water.

The global vision 2030 envisages the realisation of green clean environment without pollution, having prosperity without poverty, peace without fear, and happy place to live for all citizens of the nations of the world," said Kalam.

He expected that the world would be able to identify core competency of each nation by 2030 and take missions for coordinating the core competencies of different nations, which will lead to economic advantage and faster development for all societies.

Kalam also envisaged a world where students of all societies are imparted education with value system, affordable quality healthcare is available to all, governance is responsive, transparent and corruption free, and where crimes against women and children are

absent and none feels alienated.

He dreams of a world where every nation is able to give clean green environment to all its citizens.

The former Indian president said the world faces challenges of poverty, illiteracy, safe drinking water, clean and green energy, equitable distribution of resources, quality education, societal imbalances, quality healthcare for all and good living conditions.

Individual nations are working to find a solution to these challenges. However, we are clearly witnessing that challenges faced by nations are not of their making," he said.

"There are many international dimensions for the cause and solutions. Hence, working for solutions is a collective responsibility of global community," he said. "When nations start working on the common enemies of illiteracy, poor health etc., their tendency to focus on national, regional and global peace with better mutual trust is enabled."

The noted scientist said the world is integrally connected through environment, people, economy and ideas.

"Global warming is no longer a problem of individual nations. Economic turbulence originating in one part of the globe shook the whole world."

He said advances in transportation have progressively made movement of people across the nations and regions easier. Ideas are no longer geographically confined.

"Local or regional issues will invariably gain global prominence and unaddressed problems, including poverty, can mutate rapidly into global terrorism which we are already witnessing," said Kalam.

On regional level, he pointed to the potential of Saarc and said nations under the trading bloc account for one out of four persons on the planet and enjoy a high concentration of world's youth.

The region, while representing emerging economies, has the challenges of overcoming poverty and social disparity.

"We offer to sit with our government and formulate a detail policy guideline that will unleash the full potential of our creative, energetic private sector to bring about Bangladeshi miracle, which we feel confident to achieve."