

THE NATION EXCLUSIVE

MASS GRAVE IN THAILAND

4 suspects held, top cop suspended



An illegal migrant, one of the four found alive near a mass grave in a Thai area bordering Malaysia, eats a snack at Padang Besar Hospital in Songkhla's Sadao district yesterday.

PHOTO: THE NATION

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Thailand's national police chief said yesterday that the head of Satun police will be suspended from duty in connection with the ongoing investigation into human traffickers active near the southern border.

National police commissioner General Somyot Poompanmoung said that a team of investigators led by his deputy General Aek Angsanonont had suggested a transfer of Police Major-General Sunthorn Chalermkiat, who is chief of the Satun police, to an inactive post at Royal Thai Police headquarters. Somyot said this was because Sunthorn has close ties with a suspected leader of the trafficking ring.

The national police chief said he would also transfer the five most senior officers at Padang Besar police station in Songkhla, including the superintendent, out of their current jurisdiction. That was in addition to seven more police in Padang Besar suspected of getting bribes from traffickers.

Yesterday, Pol Second Lieutenant Aree Mansaman and Pol Snr Sgt-Major Assaneeran Nuanrod were transferred out of Padang Besar to facilitate a probe against them. The campsite is in the station's jurisdiction.

The authorities have arrested four of the eight suspects wanted in connection with an alleged extortion and murder camp in Thailand's southern border province of Songkhla.

In custody are Asan Intanu, 48, Ro-ay Sonyalae, 41, Alee Lahmah, 47, and Soe Naing Arnua (Anwar), 40.

Still on the run are Prasit Lemleh, deputy mayor of the Padang Besar

Municipality, Yalee Krem, village head of Moo 8 Ban Taloh, Pakphon Benlateh, and Charoen Thongdaeng.

All eight have been charged with human trafficking, illegal detention and seeking ransom money.

Authorities have taken action against them after 26 bodies were exhumed on Saturday from a mass graveyard in a border zone in Songkhla's Sadao district.

At least one witness has said murders took place at a nearby border campsite where hundreds of migrants had been held.

It is believed that the bodies in the graveyard came from the camp.

The four arrested suspects, however, have denied any role in illegal detention, extortion and human trafficking. Asan has admitted only to having a gun and ammunition in his possession illegally.

Somyot said police were urgently gathering evidence and would bring all the culprits to justice, even if they were government officials or politicians.

"If evidence suggests they might have been involved, we will arrest them," he said.

He added that police were preparing to seek arrest warrants for four more suspects.

One of the 26 bodies from the graveyard was a female, Somyot said.

He said that judging by the fact that some bodies had been interred recently while others had long been buried, it was possible that the camp had been operating for a long time.

Provincial Police Region 8 deputy commissioner Maj-General Somchai Nittayabavornkul said local police-

men had engaged in the trafficking of Rohingya.

"These policemen have been arrested and prosecuted. It's just that their cases have not appeared in news reports," he said before he attended a meeting with Deputy Defence Minister and Army chief General Udomdej Sitabutr on how to tackle and prevent the trafficking of Rohingya.

During the meeting in Ranong, Udomdej said officials involved in the trafficking of Rohingya people into Thailand would face decisive legal action.

He instructed relevant state agencies to prepare a list of suspects involved with traffickers who smuggled Rohingya and other "boat people" into Thailand.

Udomdej, who is also deputy director of the Internal Security Operations Command (Isoc), admitted that the trafficking network in Ranong was "not a small movement because they have been active for some time".

Somyot said Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha had directly instructed him to work closely with Udomdej to initiate a fast crackdown on human-trafficking gangs that had caused severe damage to Thailand's reputation.

Ranong has been a key entry point for illegal migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, Grisada Boonrach, head of the Department of Provincial Administration, said he ordered the village headman and two assistants be suspended over their alleged involvement in trafficking in the border area. The suspension is effective from today.

Kidnapped, treated like slaves of past

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"We were untied only once a day for having a meagre diet of bread and flattened rice," said Jewel, who works at a mechanical workshop.

"You must finish the meal in 10 minutes ... don't even think of refusing it. Your death means a big financial loss to us," Jewel quoted the guard as saying.

The captives felt so miserable that they begged the captors to send them to Malaysia instead of torturing them.

"We told the guard that if we were to die, we would prefer to perish in the sea. Death there would be much better than being tied and beaten this way," said Jewel.

He and the other 13 abductees were bundled into a boat that left Teknaf's Kochubuniya for Thailand on November 31, 2013.

Jewel was rescued from a Thai jungle on January 26 last year, while the fate of the other 13 is still unknown.

Investigations have revealed that floating labourers, mostly for construction and cultivation, fall victims to abduction. Human traffickers use various tricks to lure people into their traps.

Jewel's neighbour Anancha Barua tricked him into travelling to Noapara, saying one of his friends there was looking for a mechanic for fixing machines.

Jewel took a three-hour bus ride from his home in Ukhia, and fell straight into the traffickers' trap.

In a similar way, human traffickers tricked Mohammad Ismail, a house painter in Ukhia, promising him high pay.

Ismail's friend Osman told him to see a person in Teknaf for getting work.

As he went to the address provided by Osman, several traffickers lurking there beat him up and kept him confined for days.

Aged 23, Ismail was forced into a boat to Thailand in early 2013. Fortunately, he was rescued by Thai police in January last year.

The story of Afaz Uddin, a farmer in Ukhia, was a bit different.

A person named Jamal, whom Afaz knew for six months, invited him to his house in Teknaf's Noapara.

Once the farmer arrived at Jamal's house, he was beaten and held captive. Later, he was sold to traffickers for Tk 30,000.

What is of great concern is that a section of these victims are children. One example is the abduction of two Madrasa students by human traffickers in Teknaf.

Ibrahim and Yusuf, both students of Al-jamia Al-Ashrafia Kashemul Ulum Madrasa, were lured into a trap by their classmate Mohammad Ali, 15.

Ali gave them false hopes of becoming rich, saying all they needed to do was take a sea voyage to Malaysia and work there for only a few years.

As planned, Ali took the two to the house of broker Mohammad Hossain on November 14. Ali got Tk 40,000 from Hossain for handing over his two classmates to him.

Hossain then hired a CNG-run auto-rickshaw and brought the boys to the house of human trafficker Khuilla Mia at Quainchori in Teknaf.

"I sensed trouble the moment I entered Khuilla's house around 7:00pm that day," said Ibrahim.

When Ibrahim told Khuilla that he was no longer interested in travelling to Malaysia, the trafficker and his accomplices beat him up.

They then kept both the boys confined to the shack.

"I screamed, kicked the door of the house, and eventually made an escape," said Ibrahim.

While running away, he found a shop, and phoned his father Faridul Alam, a village doctor, for help.

But soon Khuilla and his cohorts chased him down and took him back to confinement around 8:00pm. They roughed him up and threatened to kill him.

On information from Ibrahim's father, a team of Border Guard Bangladesh raided Khuilla's house about three hours later, and rescued the two boys.

Making false promises, human traffickers trapped another boy, Mohammad Ismail, a seventh-grade student of Goyalmara Dakhil Madrasa, in Ukhia in September last year.

The 17-year-old was tricked by his neighbours Shafi Alam and Ramzar Ali, who took him to a house in Paschim Sonapara by a CNG-run auto-rickshaw on November 9 to send him to Malaysia as slave labour.

Ismail's mother Monwara Begum came to know about it from neighbours.

Three days later, the boy's parents got a phone call from the traffickers, who asked them to pay the duo a ransom of Tk 50,000 to get their son back.

The cell phone, used for making the call, was found switched off since then.

Finally, Ismail's father Jafar Alam informed the police about it on November 22, and filed an abduction case against Shafi and Ramzan.

Nothing could yet be known about the boy's fate.

The cases of abduction have given rise to a sense of insecurity among coastal people.

Mohammad Alam, a shopkeeper at St Martin's Island, sensed that fear recently.

"I went to Teknaf for buying goods for my grocery shop. It was already dark when I reached there," said Alam.

"I didn't dare go out of the hotel the whole evening and night. I was afraid that I could be abducted if I went out after dark," he said.



At least three students of this school, inset, and two family members of the house, above, in St Martin's Island have been missing since they left for Malaysia falling prey to trafficking gangs.

PHOTO: STAR

Thailand under fresh pressure

AGENCIES

Thailand is under pressure from the United States and the European Union to stop what has for several years been a thriving business of human smuggling, trafficking and slavery both on land and in its fishing fleets.

The trafficking problem poses potentially significant sanctions for Thailand's economy, which is already struggling with dwindling exports and slowing consumption following a military coup in May last year.

The EU is threatening to ban some \$700 million a year in seafood imports if Thailand doesn't make a marked improvement in ensuring labour standards in an industry racked by allegations of slave labour and violence. Brussels has given Thailand six months to clean up the industry.

Thailand's efforts to combat human trafficking have come under renewed scrutiny after the discovery of more than two dozen bodies from a jungle camp that authorities suspect smugglers used to hide migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The finding is a blow for the junta and comes shortly before publication of an annual US government report on human trafficking. Bangkok expressed "deep regret and disappointment" at Washington's decision to downgrade Thailand in last year's report to the third and lowest tier of countries deemed not to be combating people

smuggling.

While the US has so far announced no plans for sanctions that can result from tier-three status, this could change if Washington feels Thai authorities are not responding to the blacklisting.

There have been multiple reports of forced and slave labour in the Thai fishing industry, which was last month issued with a "yellow card" by the EU and warned it could face trade sanctions if it did not improve regulation.

Meanwhile, Thai police have made arrests linked to a large human trafficking network.

A man called Soe Naing, known as Anwar, is believed to be a key figure behind the network. He was charged yesterday with human trafficking, false imprisonment and holding people for ransom. Three Thai government officials were also arrested on the same charges.

Speaking about Anwar's arrest, Police Colonel Anuchon Chamat said: "This is huge. He's a big guy, a top guy."

Phone records, financial transactions and witness testimony point to Anwar, a Rohingya living in the southern Thai province of Songkhla, allegedly playing a central role in the operation, Anuchon said. Police are also collecting DNA evidence from the grave site, which may contribute to any potential murder charges, he added.

[Based on reports of The New York Times, The Independent, Reuters, The Wall Street Journal and Financial Times]

Rohingyas the easy prey

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coast only to be arrested and sent to the detention centre.

"When we explained to Thai police our persecutions in Burma, we were released only to be handed over to other boat agents," Zafar who has been living in Malaysia since 1992 told The Daily Star over the phone.

To cross into Malaysia, he had to pay the agents \$300 that he had collected from his relatives staying in Thailand.

"I was lucky to be able to pay. I never knew the fate of others who could not," said Zafar.

He is one of the thousands of Rohingya men and women, who have been fleeing to Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and China to escape persecutions in Myanmar.

While some could manage fake passports of other countries like Bangladesh to move to third countries such as Saudi Arabia, a large number of them took the dangerous sea journeys.

The trend began in the 1990s as the military juntas continued to rule the country, imposing discriminatory regulations on the Rohingyas who are estimated to be 1.1 million, mostly in Rakhine.

According to the UN refugee agency UNHCR, the Rohingyas were not formally recognised as Burmese national group after the country's independence in 1948. The 1982 Citizenship Law too denied them citizenship.

They are subject to various exploitations including forced labour, extortion, restrictions on movement, denial

of residence rights, inequitable marriage regulations, and land confiscation.

Amid military oppression, some 5 lakh Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh -- first in 1978 and then in 1991-92. Presently, around 32,000 refugees stay in the UNHCR-run camps in Bangladesh, while an estimated 5 lakh live outside the camps.

According to the UNHCR, some 1.4 lakh Rohingyas live in Malaysia and 1.32 lakh in Thailand, but the unofficial figure could be much higher.

Under the present reformist government formed in 2011, Myanmar saw the worst sectarian violence in 2012 that left hundreds dead and 1.4 lakh homeless, mostly Rohingyas in Rakhine province. Already grappling with the refugees, Bangladesh this time closed its door to new Rohingya influx.

Transnational human trafficking gangs, meanwhile, are cashing in on the growing desperation of the Rohingya people subjected to violence by the Buddhist mobs.

The UNHCR says from June 2012 to June 2014, some 87,000 people have departed by sea from Bangladesh and Myanmar border.

On reaching Thailand by cargo ships, each Rohingya is asked to pay a ransom worth \$1500-2000 [Tk 1.2 lakh to 1.6 lakh] before being pushed into Malaysia, it said.

"In remote jungle camps in Thailand, transnational criminal networks are beating and torturing their captives in an attempt to extract ransom payments from their families and friends," said Matthew Smith, execu-

tive director of Thailand-based rights group Fortify Rights, in an email interview to The Daily Star.

Those failing to pay ransom are sold to the fishing industry as slave labour or forced to work in the jungle camps, international media reported.

Exhumation of 26 bodies from the mass graves in such jungle camps in Thailand's Sadao district last week comes as yet another testimony to the horrific conditions the trafficking victims face and how many of them end up dying there.

These deaths are in addition to those killed during the sea journeys where they were either starved to death or being dumped or shot by the traffickers.

The UNHCR said that last year alone, over 200 people may have died along the route beginning at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

In some cases, Matthew Smith said, Thai authorities have been complicit in human trafficking, selling detainees to criminal syndicates, who then bring them to traffickers' camps.

Even after crossing into Malaysia, the Rohingya men, women and children are held captive in holding houses in Penang and other northern states until ransom is paid.

"If the ransom is not paid, the person is then further trafficked or killed," a human rights activist in Penang told this correspondent, requesting anonymity.

Zafar said that soon after they reached Malaysia sometime in 1992, he and some other Rohingyas were arrested and put in jail. Released after

four months, he was handed over to the "agents" in Thai bordering areas of Kelantan, northeastern state of Malaysia, only to be extorted twice.

Eventually, he reached Kuala Lumpur and got registered with the UNHCR after months of efforts, but that was of no use as Malaysia neither has refugee camps nor provides aid to the refugees.

With no passport or legal job document, life in Malaysia has always been difficult and humiliating for him. He was arrested a dozen times there.

"I sometimes work in construction, but the pay is very low. I have a wife and three children to look after, but I can't do much for them," said Zafar.

"I have no state, no security of life. I feel very sad, frustrated. Often I cry and have sleepless nights," he went on.

His tale sums up the plight thousands of stateless Rohingyas go through. Rasheduzzaman, professor of international relations at Dhaka University, said the reformist government of Myanmar was said to be democratic, but there were no signs that its policy on the Rohingya would see a change in the near future.

Even the opposition democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been kept under house arrest for almost 15 of the 21 years from 1989 to 2010, is silent on it. It means the humanitarian crisis that the world sees today on the Rohingya issue may continue, he said.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the international community, however, can surely play a proactive role in the process, he said.