

5 more graves found at Thai jungle camp

THE NATION/ANN, Thailand

Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha has warned of tough action against state officials linked to human trafficking, a government spokesman said yesterday.

The prime minister has instructed local administrators, as well as police and military officers to carefully scan their areas of responsibility to see if there is any human trafficking or other illegal activity, such as forest encroachment, drug trade, or severe crimes, deputy government spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd said yesterday.

Local administrators of all levels - villages, tambons and districts - were ordered to comb their areas of jurisdiction to see if there was any illegal camp to hold migrants.

He said responsible officials would be moved out of their areas of jurisdiction, as punishment, if more cases of human trafficking were found.

"If there is any serious incident like one in Sadao district of Songkhla again, the officials involved will be moved out of their areas. It's because they failed to enforce the law," the spokesman said.

He was referring to the discovery of a mass gravesite in Sadao district's Padang Besar border area, where 26 bodies of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh were discovered recently near a jungle camp believed to be used for detaining illegal migrants.

"Any official found to accept bribes or make personal gains will face criminal as well as disciplinary actions," Sansern said.

He added that officials believed to turn a blind eye to such illegal activity would be moved out of their area and severe disciplinary action would be taken against them.

"The government must use strong medicine against all forms of crime," the spokesman said. "This is to get rid of the deep-rooted evil from Thailand."

Investigators probing human trafficking in the area have discovered five more graves at a second jungle camp believed to hold the remains of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh, police said

yesterday.

No bodies were found in the graves.

The camp was uncovered just a kilometre from a similar "holding area" on a steep hillside near the Malaysian border, where forensic teams found 26 bodies over the weekend - all but one buried in shallow graves.

"We found the second camp [Monday] evening," national police spokesman Lt-General Prawut Thavomsiri told reporters, saying it was near the first camp.

Police and rescue workers found eight deserted makeshift huts believed to have been used by migrants. They destroyed the newly-built huts in order to prevent them from being used by traffickers.

Separately, in the southern province of Phang-nga, governor Prayoon Ratanaseni and provincial police chief General Chalit Kaewyarat led a team of local officials to inspect an area used as a jungle camp for Rohingya in Takua Pa district.

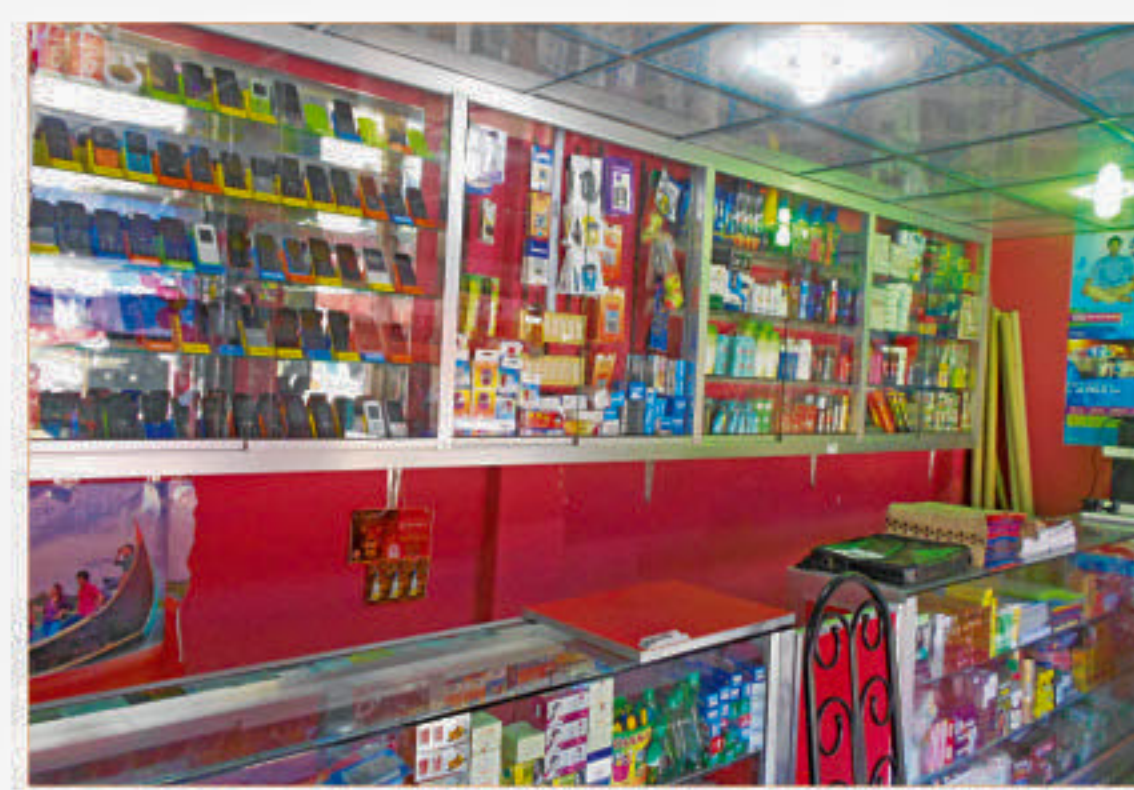
They found a skeleton, believed to be of a Rohingya woman, buried in a Muslim funeral style.

Meanwhile, national police chief General Somyot Poompunmoung yesterday issued an order to transfer 15 police officers in the South out of their areas of jurisdiction, in connection with the probe into the trafficking scandal.

The officers included Satun police chief Maj-General Sunthorn Chalermkiat, and seven more police colonels, most of them from Padang Besar station, whose jurisdiction covers the area where the mass graves were found.

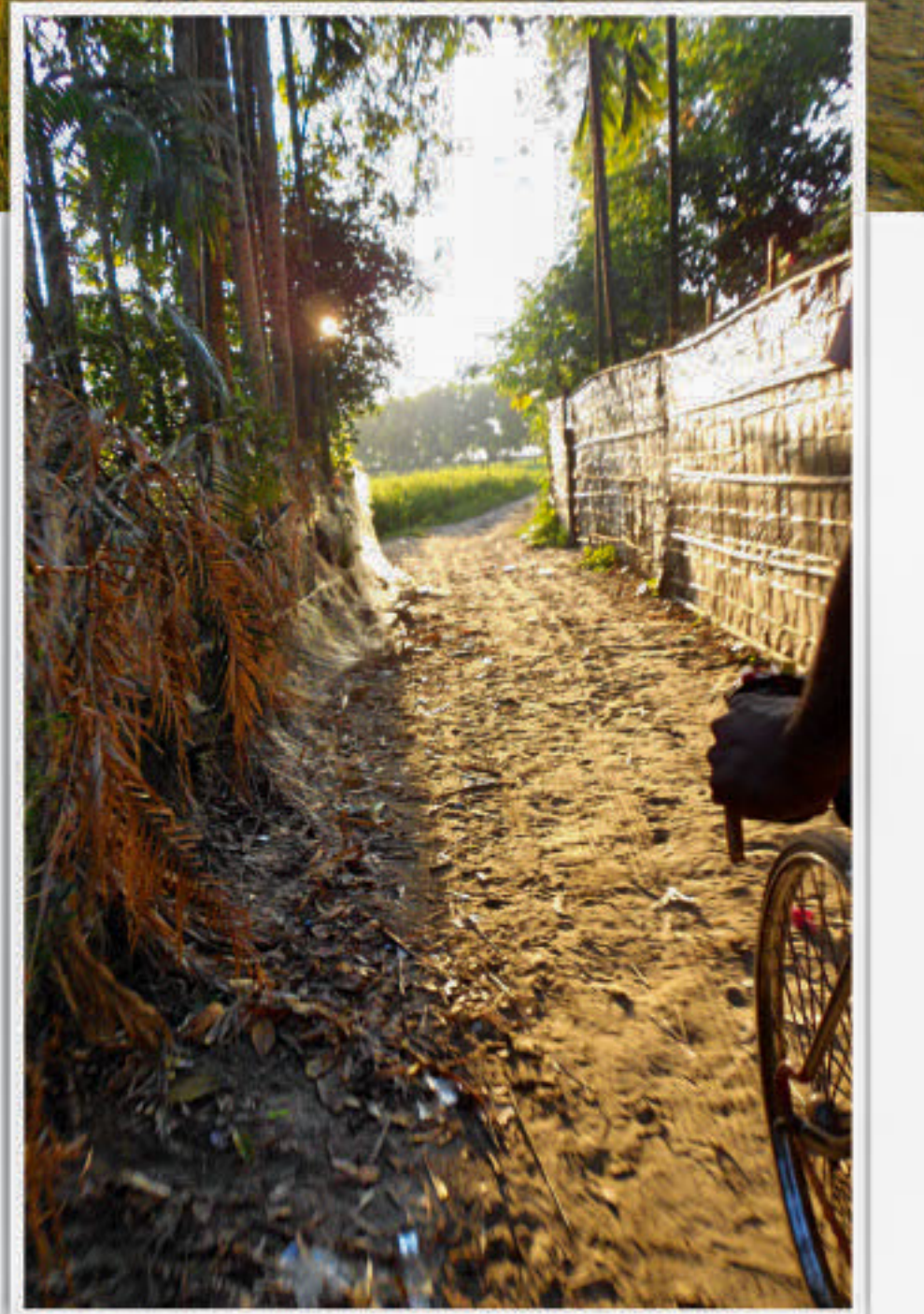
In Ranong, which borders Myanmar in the Andaman Sea, Rohingya who have settled in Thailand for over 20 years disclosed that four unpopulated islands located between the two countries were used by human traffickers to hide illegal migrants before bringing them onto the mainland at Ranong.

The Rohingyas, who spoke on condition of anonymity, identified the islands as Yipoon, Kangkao, Kam and Noppaket. They were among those who hid on the islands or knew someone who did.



Clockwise from left to right, there are several points in this water body, known as Reju Canal, to start the journey as it falls into the Bay. Teknaf's Katabunia village is another place from where boatpeople start their journey almost every night. A road in Noapara village leading to Katabunia. A big mobile phone shop in a remote place like Noapara and most of its customers are said to be traffickers and job seekers. Another shop that sells dry food in the area.

PHOTO: EMRAN HOSSAIN



EXCLUSIVE FOR THE DAILY STAR

'Malaysia airports' in Teknaf

FROM PAGE 1

accounts and mobile banking.

Such "airports" are located mainly in Katabunia, Khurermukh and Sonapara. The Daily Star visited these areas in October last year.

"Sonapara has everything a voyager need on the way," said Abul Kashem, executive director of the Ukhaia branch of Help, an NGO.

"The number of these 'airports' is increasing because human trafficking business is booming. Also, traffickers keep changing the routes all the time," he added.

Many houses in these areas lodge jobseekers for Tk 500 a night. Local kids make money buying things for the jobseekers, who are not allowed to go out until they board the boats.

Teknaf's Noapara is notorious for human trafficking where many of the abductions by traffickers allegedly take place.

Sabrang union's thriving Noapara Bazar is one of the last points in the south of mainland Bangladesh. Shops there sell fancy mobile phones whose main customers are human traffickers, locals said.

"bKash [a mobile banking service] agents work as accountants of the traffickers," claimed Abul Kalam Azad,

a resident of Noapara and vice-president of Teknaf Jobo League.

"Each agent has several hundred SIM cards for receiving ransoms," he added.

There are shops selling large water containers, sacks of puffed and flattened rice, fruits, biscuits and drinks for the jobseekers. These shops usually do not sell anything in small quantity. Everything is sold in bulk.

A restaurant named Bhatghar in Noapara Bazar, where hardly a dozen people could eat together, earns between Tk 3.5 lakh and 4.5 lakh a month.

The Daily Star reporters saw scrap plastic traders stuffing four sacks with empty bottles of an energy drink popular among rural people. Each sack weighed 40kg and the bottles were collected from the "airport" area over just a few days.

Locals said most of these drinks were consumed by trafficking victims as it was almost impossible for the locals to buy that many drinks even in a few months.

THE BAIT

With the business booming, brokers have come up with striking new ideas to entice more people to take the risky voyage.

In March last year, 10 men in Pabna

were snared by a local broker. But the men had no money to go to Cox's Bazar. The broker gave them Tk 2,000 each for the trip. That was unusual given local brokers charge every fortune-seeker at least Tk 5,000 for "finding jobs" for them.

However, the travel money was just a bait.

"It [the money] did not help us anyway, as we were robbed of all our money, mobile phones and even our sandals soon after we reached Teknaf," said Anisur Rahman, one of the 10 men, who now works in Malaysia as a cleaner.

Of late, brokers have devised another strategy: If a jobseeker can supply four people to the chain, he can go abroad for free, said a Bangladesh expatriate in Malaysia who turned broker.

THE SANDALS

Samuda Begum, 60, was taking her morning walk along the Sonapara beach on one morning in October last year when The Daily Star team was visiting.

While walking, she came across a familiar sight: sandals, 35 pairs, lying on the beach. She took them home, like she did in the past.

"Jobseekers have to take off their sandals before boarding the boats,"

said Samuda, explaining, "It means 35 jobseekers left from there last night."

A few pairs, some apparently of women, were seen hanging from a coconut tree in her courtyard.

A number of neighbours came to her house during our visit to her house and said they too often saw and collected sandals from the beach. We saw many pairs of sandals in courtyards of three other homes.

A CHANGED COMMUNITY
In this area, men who were once involved with fishing industry are now falling prey to human trafficking or becoming traffickers themselves.

Due to the shortage boatmen, many of about 5,000 fishing trawlers in the area remain moored, said Abdul Khaleque, general secretary of Cox's Bazar Fishing Trawler Owners Association.

Over half the skilled people, almost 50,000, have been lured by traffickers over the past several years, he claimed.

"The pay of a boatman doubled to Tk 2,000 in the last six months," he said, adding, even that did not stop people from leaving.

Mohammad Ali Miah, 43, lost his fishing trawler after all the 17 crew members sold the boat for Tk 11 lakh to pay traffickers for taking them to Malaysia.

BOAT CAPSIZE

40 migrants die off Italy coast

AFP, Rome

Around 40 migrants died when an inflatable boat carrying more than 100 people sank off the coast of Italy, Save the Children quoted survivors as saying yesterday.

"They said there were 137 people aboard an inflatable boat that deflated or exploded - it wasn't clear - and that some of them fell overboard. Some said 'very many' died, others said 'around 40'," Giovanna di Benedetto of Save the Children told AFP.

The survivors were part of a group of close to 200 migrants who were on two separate boats and were rescued in recent days in waters off Sicily.

The survivors arrived on Tuesday in Catania on the east coast of Sicily, on the cargo ship "Zeran", which also carried five bodies.

According to the survivors, the incident occurred shortly before the weekend's rescue operations, in which the Italian navy and coastguard rescued nearly 6,000 people with the help of several merchant ships.

On Monday more than 3,000 migrants landed in southern Italian ports, including a baby girl born on board the Italian navy patrol ship Bettica.

Her mother had gone into labour just before leaving Libya aboard one of four barely seaworthy boats whose occupants were rescued by the Bettica.

This weekend's surge in the number of boats leaving Libya was put down to the fine weather and calm sea conditions.

More than 1,750 people are estimated to have died in the waters between Libya and Italy since the start of this year.



Trucks are about to leave Panchagarh with 375 tonnes of rice for quake victims of Nepal through Banglabandha-Phulbari-Kakarvitta border yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

65-day ban

FROM PAGE 1

of marine resources, including oil and gas.

To ensure safe environment for breeding, the ban should be enforced every year, the minister said, adding all the other coastal countries suspend marine fishing in this breeding season.

"We reached the decision after a long discussion with various stakeholders like the Marine Fisheries Association, the Marine Fisheries Academy, researchers, university professors and senior officials of the Department of Fisheries."

A circular in this regard would be issued soon.

The decision, first ever in Bangladesh, will benefit the country in several ways if it is implemented properly, said Prof Shahadat Hossain of Institute of Marine Sciences and Fisheries at Chittagong University.

Out of 475 fish species in the Bay, 85 to 90 of them are commercially important, added Prof Shahadat, who was present at the meeting.

"Most of the commercially important fishes, including the pomfret, sea bass, red snapper, Bomday duck and Indian salmon, breed in this season. If we could save 10 to 20 percent of mother fishes during this period, the marine fish stock would be doubled in next five years."

However, Ahsan Iqbal Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Marine Fisheries Association questioned why the government is banning only commercial trawling.

"Commercial trawlers are engaged in only 30 percent of fishing in the sea. So it is unfair if the government slaps ban only on commercial fishing trawlers."

He admitted that other countries declare "no-fishing zone" or "no-fishing period", but those are applicable to all modes of fishing, not only commercial trawling, he added.

Currently, Bangladesh produces 5.5 to 6 lakh tonnes of marine fishes every year in the absence of a marine fishing policy. Over 200 commercial fishing trawlers remain engaged throughout the year.

Biman may get green light for US flight

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government expects to resume flight operations in the US by Biman Bangladesh Airlines this year once the existing category of Bangladesh's aviation regulator is upgraded.

Currently, Biman or any other airlines from Bangladesh are not allowed to fly to the US as the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has placed the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) in Category-2.

The Caab was downgraded after the FAA had found irregularities in its operational activities during an investigation in December 1997.

As Biman's Dhaka-New York flight was continuing, the FAA allowed it to operate until Biman stopped operation on the route in 2006 due to huge loss.

in October and hope to achieve Category-1 status by the FAA," Civil Aviation Minister Rashed Khan Menon said yesterday at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

The minister made the remark while talking to journalists following awarding certificates to the Caab inspectors, who successfully completed government safety inspector course conducted by the FAA.

Menon also said a restructured organogram for Caab creating more than 5,000 posts for the civil aviation regulator and enactment of Caab laws, which are prerequisite to achieve Category-1 status by the FAA, would be completed within next one month.

He added the training to the inspectors by the FAA would enable them to implement the flight safety rules and

regulations properly and this would help Caab achieve Category-1 status.

Asked about Biman managing director's observation that Dhaka-New York flight would incur loss, Menon said he did not think so as Bangladeshi expatriates would support it.

He also said commercial issues should not always be considered as Dhaka-New York route had political and social issues and involved emotion of the expats.

Addressing the award ceremony, Caab Chairman Air Vice Marshal M Sanaul Huq, said 136 flight standard inspectors of Caab had attained international standard after completing four ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organisation)-endorsed courses.

With this training, Caab had attained an important step required to achieve the FAA Category 1, he added.

45 police officials promoted to SP

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has promoted 45 officials of additional superintendent rank to superintendents of police (SPs) in different districts.

In a circular yesterday, the ministry said the order would take effect immediately.

The promotion order came nearly a month after 134 police officials were elevated to higher positions in the police administration.

On April 7, twenty-one SPs or equivalent rank were promoted to the position of additional deputy inspector general. Besides, 113 senior assistant superintendents of police (senior ASPs) or officials equally ranked were made additional superintendents of police.

The 45 promoted officers are: Md Iqbal, Sana Shamunur Rahman,

Mustafizur Rahman, Jahangir Hossain, Humayun Kabir, Gias Uddin Ahmed, Abdur Razzak, Soheli Ferdous, Farida Yeasmin, Shahina Amin, Romana Akter, Zobaider Rahman, Saidur Rahman Khan, Shamsunnahar, Sarwar Hossain, Asad Ullah Chowdhury, Sajid Hossain, Belal Uddin, AKM Iqbal Hossain, Ziaul Haq, Mashrurur Rahman, Khaled, Ali Ahmad Khan, Nizam Uddin, Nasima Akter, Shah Jalal, Shyamal Kumar Mukherjee, Sazzadur Rahman, Bijoy Bosak, Moazzem Hossain Bhuiyan, Prabir Kumar Roy, ASM Mahtab Uddin, Joydeb Chowdhury, Mohiul Islam, Anwar Hossain, Rashidul Islam Khan, AHM Kamruzzaman, Sarder Rokontuzaman, Subhash Chandra Saha, Muntasirul Islam, Mizanur Rahman, SM Rashidul Haq, Shamsun Nahar, Syeda Jannat Ara, Anwar Hossain and Moktar Hossain.