

Find all migrant camps

Thai PM gives 10-day deadline for complete search in all areas possible

THE NATION/ANN

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha yesterday gave a 10-day deadline for a complete scrutiny of all areas for possible detention camps and graves related to trafficked Rohingya people.

Local authorities would look for existing crimes or related illegal activities, said Deputy Government Spokesman Maj-General Sansern Kaewkamnerd.

The scans would be carried out through normal procedures but if problems or delays were encountered, Article 44 of the provisional constitution would be invoked to clear any obstacles, he said, without giving details on how the measures would be adopted under the article.

The Interior Ministry's Provincial Administration Department would gather information from local agencies during the 10-day scan before holding meetings to pass on instructions from the government on how to tackle the problems that had arisen.

"If government officials are found involved and local agencies are powerless to deal with them, report the findings to the department director-general and the government will step in to deal with the problems," he said.

Local officials from village heads to district chiefs would not only search for signs of Rohingya trafficking, such as detention camps and graves, but

also other crimes ranging from land encroachment and illegal or unregulated fishing to the drug trade.

The discovery of detention camps and graveyards in the South, used by smugglers to detain or bury Rohingya migrants, raises concerns that Thailand would run afoul of US and EU protocols against human trafficking and abuse of fishermen. Sansern said Thailand was doing its best to tackle all these problems and it was up to the US to decide what action it wanted to take against Thailand next month.

Pol Lt-General Chakthip Chaijinda, deputy national police chief, said he would discuss the Rohingya trafficking issue with his Malaysian counterparts during a border meeting today.

A local police commander was assigned to coordinate with Myanmar, from where the Rohingya come, while he was in talks with Malaysia. Both countries are offering good cooperation, he added.

OPERATIONS CENTRE

An operations centre to tackle Rohingya trafficking, set up in Songkhla's Hat Yai district, would bring together officials from various agencies, he said.

The southern provinces of Ranong, Phang Nga and Satun, as well as parts of Songkhla, have been used by traffickers, but closely coordinated efforts through this new centre were expected

to bring good results, he said.

Army spokesman Colonel Winthai Suvari said the army would not protect a major accused of being part of a smuggling syndicate that detained Rohingya and demanded ransoms for their release from their families.

Questioning of a group of four military officers was underway after villagers filed a police complaint accusing them of holding some Rohingya people for money.

The four officers had been assigned to investigate trafficking in the Padang Besar border town of Songkhla.

In Sadao district of that province, eight graves in an abandoned Islamic cemetery were excavated yesterday.

Six skeletal remains, including four of women, were found. The post-mortem is expected to identify who the dead are, or whether they are Rohingya.

Local police quoted villagers as saying all six were not local residents. An imam, Abdulloh Jaidee, said what was suspicious about the six bodies was that stretchers were found nearby.

An interpreter based in Nakhon Si Thammarat said he was feeling pressure after television reports recently cited his role as a police witness. Sofie Muhammad said he was only a certified interpreter who assisted police in their questioning of Rohingya and witnesses.

A relative of a murdered ransom victim had to be put under police protection after he came out with details about Rohingya trafficking, he said.



Thirty-one bodies of women and children, believed to be victims of trafficking, floated to the Teknaf coastline in May 2013 after their boat reportedly sank in rough sea weather. Eighteen of the bodies were buried at Teknaf Municipality Graveyard. Amena Khatun, inset, failed to save her husband held captive by traffickers in a Thai jungle in 2013 even after paying the ransom.

PHOTO: EMRAN HOSSAIN



Sailing off into hell

FROM PAGE 1

So Jewel hardly needed to use the toilet throughout the journey. But when he did, he was terrified. "Blood passed when I urinated," he said.

About four to eight men enforced strict discipline, turning pieces of rope into whips by tying a knot at one end.

Ukhiya's Ismail, one of Jewel's fellow travellers, saw them use one such whip against a man from Moheshkhali for attempting to jump off the boat.

Another man from Moheshkhali was thrown overboard for demanding the crew share drinking water with them.

"Around half the 500 travellers on board suffered diarrhoea and those with deteriorating health were just thrown overboard while a few committed suicide," said Ismail.

Bangladesh Coast Guard recovered five bodies and 29 bullet-hit people from a trawler with 313 people on board that came under gun attack by traffickers in June 2013. The attack had happened when jobseekers, enraged by the trawler's delay in leaving for Thailand, revolted against the traffickers.

Survivors reported having seen more than one cargo vessel anchored in Bangladesh's waters, which were being operated by Thai people. In September last year Bangladesh Navy seized one such vessel -- about 20-metre long and around 130 km off St Martin's island -- with 625 people aboard.

After making landfall, they are held in Thai jungles in inhumane condi-

tions until they pay hefty ransom.

Nazrul Islam had to pay in two phases Tk 2,30,000. The money was sent by his family in Bangladesh. However, when it was time for his release from near the Malaysian border where illegal migrants are kept in houses known as "receive house", he just changed hands from the traffickers to his Malaysian captor.

As no one came to receive him from those houses, the traffickers made an additional profit by selling him to a Malaysian construction supervisor. Without any money or support, he was treated like a slave traded at a fair price.

"My family sold our village home to pay the ransom. Then I fell into the hands of the Malaysian supervisor as none came to receive me from the traffickers. I cannot even return home," said Nazrul from Malaysia over the phone.

Nazrul nonetheless managed to escape from the supervisor following a police raid seven months later. Then he joined a glass manufacturing factory where he had to work without pay for a whole month as the employer took advantage of his illegal status as a migrant there.

"It's a curse to be an illegal migrant, always haunted by the fear of being caught by police, while working 12 hours a day and seven days a week with poor pay," said Nazrul.

Anisur Rahman, another trafficking victim, told these correspondents over the phone that his supervisor docked quite a good amount of money from his and his co-workers' (those who are

illegal migrants) wages to bribe the Malaysian police.

Some, on the other hand, run away or are rescued by police.

Ismail and seven others, having escaped from the traffickers, walked through the jungles for 43 days living on leaves and fruits until they were caught by police immediately after entering Malaysia.

Jewel said he was half-dead by the time police had rescued him.

The jails and immigration centres Jewel was taken to were reportedly crammed with illegal Bangladeshis and Rohingyas. Many were maimed from torture and could not walk without help.

Worse still, victims are convicted of illegal intrusion into Malaysia after being rescued.

Gias Uddin, another victim, served his 80-day sentence after which he was detained at the Kuala Lumpur immigration centre until repatriated.

"Only two toilets were there for 350 people," Gias remembered his days at the centre over the phone.

"You may die of fever or diarrhoea, but would not get any medicine or saline," he said.

Although repatriation takes a lot of time, there is still hope for those who would be repatriated some day.

But Nazrul, like many others, are caught in a situation wherein he can neither work legally nor report his abuses to the police. He actually finds himself in what appears to be a life-long limbo.

"Getting a job after travelling to Malaysia by sea is a myth," Nazrul said.



Family members of 16 youths, who took an illegal voyage to Malaysia in October 2013 and have been missing since then, at Kaindi in Araihaaz of Narayanganj. Fortune seeker Faruk Mia, inset, of Narsingdi's Baluchar was deported home last year only after suffering tortures in a Thai jungle by traffickers and serving six months in a Malaysian jail.

PHOTO: PORIMOL PALMA/BENAJIR AHMED



One broker an upazila's woe

FROM PAGE 1

The two tea stall owners are among the village's 16 youths who fell prey to trafficker Yakub Ali of Kalagaiccha village in the same upazila. Yakub is a suspected member of a transnational human trafficking gang active in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia.

Like Kaindi, hundreds of youths have been missing from villages in Narayanganj, Narsingdi, Jessore, Satkhira, Sirajganj, Bogra, Kushtia, and Chuadanga.

Sona Mia had no idea whatsoever about his son's planned trip to Malaysia. A week after the two went missing, Yakub told him that the duo left for abroad and asked him to arrange money for their entry to Malaysia.

An investigation by this newspaper found that fortune seekers, mostly aged between 20 and 35, both from Bangladesh and Myanmar are tricked by the lure of highly-paid jobs in Malaysia, but ultimately become captives of traffickers in Thai jungles. They are forced to pay ransoms ranging from Tk 2 lakh to Tk 3.5 lakh through their families before they are pushed into Malaysia.

Sona Mia never knew how boat people are killed in the sea or jungles, tortured or traded for labour for failure in paying ransom. Even he might be totally unaware that 26 bodies were exhumed from a mass grave in a Thai jungle camp on May 2.

Yakub in November 2013 informed him that his son had reached Thailand. He demanded Tk 1.2 lakh for sending Mujibur to Malaysia.

"I agreed, but only if my son called me. But the call never came," said Sona Mia. Nobody saw Yakub in the village since then.

As weeks went by, parents of the missing youths complained to Yakub's father Shamsul Haque about their sons. Shamsul assured the parents of bringing back the

youths, and demanded Tk 50,000 from each of the families for freeing the fortune-seekers from Thai jails.

Nine of the families paid Shamsul the amount. He took a month but returned the money after failing to deliver on the promise. The victims' parents then sought help from Ali Hossain, chairman of Haizdi Union Parishad.

"We told the chairman that all the victims' families were utterly devastated by the absence of their sons as they left their wives and children back home," said Sona Mia. But the chairman was unmoved.

On the advice of a victim's relative a few months later, Sona Mia along with some relatives of the missing youths visited Cox's Bazar and Chittagong jails, but didn't find any of the 16 victims there.

They returned downhearted and lodged a case with Araihaaz Police Station, accusing Yakub Ali. The case has made hardly any progress.

In August last year, Sona Mia filed a complaint with the foreign ministry about his missing next of kin.

Sona Mia's is one of the thousands of families gone broke after their son, brother, father or husband went missing in search of a job.

According to Ovibashi Karmi Kalyan Program, a migrants rights NGO, 11 percent of 400 foreign jobseekers from Araihaaz and Narsingdi Sadar upazilas went missing after taking the sea journey to Malaysia, while 6.33 percent died between September and December 2013.

An investigation by Development for the Disadvantaged People, a Sirajganj-based NGO, found that some 4,000 jobseekers from the district took such journeys in 2013, of whom 400 have been missing.

The Daily Star estimates around 2.5 lakh Bangladeshis took sea journeys in the last eight years, but the actual number of the missing,

murdered, jailed or dead on way to Malaysia or Thailand is still unknown.

FAMILIES IN RUINS

Head of the eight-member family, Sona Mia makes Tk 300 a day by pulling his rickshaw van. His daughter Salma stays at his house with her two-year-old daughter Moni.

Salma works at a weaving factory at the village for Tk 3,000 a month. Sona Mia's five-year-old grandson Siam is with him as his daughter-in-law Ruma stays at a relative's house as a domestic help.

Instead of sending his sons Ramzan, 7, and Sajar, 10, to school, the van puller sent them to a furniture workshop to get them ready for jobs.

"I don't know where my boys are, but my inner self says they have been languishing somewhere and will return someday," said the father.

Sanwar Hossain of Kashatbaria village in Shahzadpur, Sirajganj said his nephew Nabi Hossain, 27, disappeared in February last year.

A few days later, they learnt that Nabi has been lured by a manpower broker into leaving for Malaysia through sea.

After 17 days, Nabi called them and said he was in a jungle in Thailand. He cried for sending Tk 2.5 lakh to a certain mobile phone number, saying that traffickers would dump him into a river for failure in paying the ransom like they did to three others.

"We then sold our farmland and sent Tk 2.2 lakh. But after that we have no information about him," said Sanwar.

As Nabi remains traceless for such a long time, his aging father Mozammel Ali has become mentally unstable.

Without their breadwinners, many of the families fell into poverty and don't know when their loved ones would return.

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