

Boatpeople grateful for sanctuary

Baffled by Gambia offer

AFP, BAYELIN

Boatpeople who have come ashore in Southeast Asia after harrowing journeys are delighted that Indonesia and Malaysia will give them temporary shelter -- although some were baffled by an offer of sanctuary in a tiny African nation they had never heard of.

"I am happy now that Indonesia and Malaysia are accepting Rohingya," said Muhammadul Hasson, a 17-year-old who was rescued last week along with hundreds of other desperate people.

"Everything will be better now. People in Arakan are tortured continuously and they will keep on coming," he added, referring to the Rohingya's home state of Rakhine in western Myanmar.

But there was some confusion over an offer from the impoverished West African nation of Gambia to take in all Rohingya migrants as part of its "sacred duty" to alleviate the suffering of fellow Muslims.

Asked about the offer, Hasson simply responded: "What is the meaning of Gambia?"

Muhammad Jaber, a 27-year-old Rohingya, was another migrant who was puzzled when confronted with the idea of going to live in a country thousands of miles away that he knew nothing about.

However, he concluded: "If it is a Muslim country and they accept us as their citizens, why not?"

The migrants' joy at the decision by Malaysia and Indonesia was untempered, however.

The stateless Rohingya suffer constant abuse in Myanmar, with the government insisting they are illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

They have long been boarding rickety boats to cross the Bay of Bengal, normally headed for relatively affluent, Muslim-majority Malaysia, and have in recent years been joined by Bangladeshis seeking to escape grinding poverty.

Jaber said he did not feel any anger towards Indonesia or Malaysia, despite their previous headline stance.

Both countries are now offering to accept the boatpeople for one year, or until they can be resettled or repatriated with the help of international agencies.

"We are ready to go to any country where they can accept us as citizens, but we will not go back to Myanmar," Jaber said.

"If the government of Indonesia returns us to Myanmar, it is the same as killing us," said Sohiddullah, 45.

Hasson said he was happy to go to any other nation, but he had one condition: "I never want to go to another country by boat. Never again."



Rohingyas are transported on a truck to a newly set up confinement area in Bayeun of Indonesia on Thursday. Inset, A Rohingya woman, who recently arrived in Indonesia by boat, cries as she talks on the phone to her mother in Malaysia, inside a temporary compound for refugees in Aceh of Indonesia yesterday.

Pressure on Myanmar

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"They should have a path to citizenship," US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters in Yangon, referring to the Rohingya -- 1.3 million of whom live in Myanmar yet are dismissed as Bangladeshi illegal immigrants by the authorities.

In comments a day after talks with Myanmar leaders, Blinken added "the uncertainty that comes from not having any status is one of the things that may drive people to leave".

Attention also turned yesterday to the seas off Southeast Asia's west coast as naval vessels from Myanmar and Malaysia searched for stranded boat people and the US military prepared air patrols to step up its involvement.

Blinken said the fact that Rohingya were willing "to put their lives in jeopardy" on deadly sea crossings was a "reflection of conditions in Rakhine state that are leading people to make this choice".

"Even if we address the immediate crisis, we also must confront its root causes in order to achieve a sustainable solution," Blinken said.

Myanmar's government, however, has reiterated its refusal to recognise the stateless Rohingya as an ethnic group, preferring to call them "Bengalis" -- shorthand for illegal migrants.

European Union lawmakers are calling on Myanmar to end the persecution of Rohingya Muslims and for Thailand to launch investigations into reports of mass graves of the Muslim minority.

In a resolution Thursday, the lawmakers also called for the Thai government and officials to "end any complicity with the criminal gangs traffick-

ing Rohingya people and other migrants in Thailand."

The UN says the Rohingya are one of the most persecuted groups in the world. Neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh recognises them as citizens and they have faced increasing discrimination.

The lawmakers demanded that senior EU officials raise the issue with the Thai and Myanmar governments.

Southeast Asia's migrant crisis blew up after a Thai crackdown on human trafficking led criminals to abandon overloaded boats in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea rather than risk trying to smuggle or traffic them through preferred transit routes in Thailand.

The persecution of Rohingya also came to the fore.

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR estimated yesterday that some 3,500 migrants are still stranded on boats with dwindling supplies, and repeated its appeal for the region's governments to rescue them.

Myanmar's navy discovered two Thai boats on Thursday, one carrying migrants and the other empty, the Rakhine state government said in a press release yesterday.

"One is loaded with around 200 Bengali people," it said, using the government term for illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

"The people on the boat were all from Bangladesh," said Rakhine State government executive secretary Tin Maung Swe. "We will deport them."

Zaw Htay, director of Myanmar's presidential office, said yesterday that the men were identified as "Bangladeshi" and would be sent back to the neighbouring country.

"The Myanmar navy continues with search and rescue activities in Myanmar waters," he said. "If they find any boat with migrants, they will provide humanitarian assistance, conduct verification and return them to where they came from."

The rescue by Myanmar's navy was welcomed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which said it was helping local authorities provide assistance to the migrants.

But fears remain for many more still left on boats in the Bay of Bengal with monsoon rains looming.

"We hope that this recent positive development will be followed by other disembarkations in Myanmar and across the region, well in advance of the coming monsoon rains," UNHCR spokeswoman Vivian Tan told AFP.

The imminent monsoon season, when heavy rains and cyclones lash the region, usually lead to a significant drop off in regional boat migrant numbers.

On Thursday, the foreign ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia -- whose countries are destination points for Rohingya fleeing persecution -- met Myanmar officials as pressures mount to stem the migrant exodus from its shores.

Earlier this week, Malaysia and Indonesia relented on a hardline policy of pushing back the boats, and said their nations would accept the migrants for one year, or until they can be resettled or repatriated with the help of international agencies.

Myanmar has seen surging Buddhist nationalism in recent years and spates of violence targeting Muslim minorities have raised doubts over its much vaunted reforms after decades of harsh military rule.

A raft of laws are being considered

spanning interfaith marriage, religious conversion and birth rates, which are seen by activists as particularly discriminatory against women and minorities -- with the already marginalised Rohingya likely to be affected.

Both the US and UN have raised particular concerns about the laws proposed by President Thein Sein, seen as a response to campaigns by hardline Buddhist monks in a key election year.

Noble Peace Prize winning opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is yet to comment on the current crisis, a silence that observers attribute to fears over alienating a swathe of the electorate just months ahead of the polls.

RESCUE OPERATION

In the first official rescue operation since migrants started washing onto Southeast Asian shores earlier this month, four Malaysian navy ships searched the country's territorial waters for the boats. Navy chief Abdul Aziz Jaafar said three helicopters and three other ships were on standby.

Indonesia said it would not actively search for the migrants, but will rescue those stranded or drifting in the country's waters close to its shores, said Arrmanatha Nasir, the Foreign Ministry spokesman. He said the country would not push them back out to sea.

The US military said it was preparing to send "maritime aviation patrols throughout the region," Pentagon spokesman Lt Col Jeffrey Pool told The Associated Press on Thursday. The Department of Defence "is responding to this crisis and taking this seriously," he said.

Washington has been urging governments in the region to cooperate on search and rescue operations and

sheltering the refugees and migrants. Most of the Bangladeshis are believed to be fleeing poverty and seeking better economic opportunities in Malaysia and elsewhere.

Myanmar overcame initial reluctance and agreed to join a regional meeting next week in Thailand to address the crisis.

"We are ready to cooperate with other governments to resolve the ongoing problems through constructive engagement and on humanitarian grounds," said Zaw Htay, director of the president's office on Thursday.

The decision was made after an invitation letter arrived, he said, noting it did not imply Myanmar was solely responsible for the crisis or use the word Rohingya -- two conditions Myanmar had set for its attending the conference.

The US has said it was prepared to take a leading role in any multi-country effort organised by the UN refugee agency to resettle the most vulnerable refugees.

US Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, visiting Southeast Asia, met Thursday with Myanmar's president, army commander in chief and other officials, raising "deep concern about the thousands of vulnerable migrants stranded at sea," State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said.

"He stressed the need for Burma to address the root causes of this migration, including the racially and religiously motivated discrimination and violence facing the Rohingya population in Rakhine State," Harf said, using the former name for Myanmar.

[Compiled from Reuters, AFP and AP]

Late-night gridlock as workers block road in Banani

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A long tailback was created from Nabisco intersection to Khilkhet as transport workers blocked the New Airport Road near Banani for about 30 minutes early today.

Blocking the road around 12:15am, some 150 workers were protesting an assault on a bus driver by a man, who had introduced himself as an army major, said police.

The bus had hit the car of the man whose identity could not be confirmed.

Banani police said traffic became normal after the protesters left the street on police assurance.

Gang rape in microbus

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Uttara residence around 9:30pm, the victim's sister told The Daily Star yesterday.

"A youth, who had met me as a customer at the shop a couple of days ago, was among the rapists, and I could identify him if I saw his photo," the victim was quoted by her sister as saying.

The woman works as a sales representative at a shop at the Jamuna Future Park in Kuril area.

"My sister is very traumatised right now. Like any other day, she was waiting for a bus after she finished her work around 9:00pm Thursday night. She

walked several paces ahead of the bus stand to board on a bus easily. Two buses did not take her as there were no vacant seats.

"Minutes later, a microbus stopped a few paces ahead of her and then, reversed quickly at her. Two people came out instantly and dragged her into the vehicle which then started running towards Uttara," the sister alleged.

"They put her in the back seat and all the five people, including the driver, raped her by turns in the slowly running microbus which cruised down comparatively desolate streets. Later, they dropped her on Jasim Uddin Road at

Uttara around 10:45pm, according to the sister.

"As my sister started screaming for help and hit the window with her hand bag, the criminals brandished sharp weapons and threatened her with bad consequences," she said.

Before they dropped her, they told her that they had been stalking her for several days.

The youth who had met her at her workplace asked her about her salary, and opening and closing hours of her job, claimed the victim's sister.

The victim filed a case in this connection with Bhatara Police Station under

Women and Children Repression Act 2000 at 12:30pm yesterday.

Bhatara Police Station Officer-in-Charge Nurul Muttakin said, "After the victim filed the case, we sent her to the Victim Support Centre at Tejgaon to ensure her safety."

He said the victim would be sent to Dhaka Medical College today for forensic test.

Meanwhile, Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Annisul Huq visited the Bhatara Police Station last night and requested the OC to identify the culprits.

Asked about any progress in investigation, the OC said, "None of the rapists

were known to the victim. She is very traumatised now. Still, we are collecting information from her about the car and the perpetrators. Based on the information, we have started an investigation with utmost importance."

According to Ain O Salish Kendra, 123 women have been raped this year between January and March. Of them, 15 died.

Last year 626 women were raped and among them 208 were gang-raped. Of them, 64 died and 13 committed suicide. Besides, there were 81 attempts of rape, the rights body says.

Ensure justice, stop the crime

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They called on the Bangladeshi authorities to swiftly and impartially investigate Ananta's death as well as the murders of Oyasiquir and Avijit, and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice in accordance with international fair trial standards.

"We also demand that the authorities do all in their power to provide protection and support to bloggers and other writers at risk in Bangladesh, in accordance with Bangladesh's obligations under national and international law," read the letter.

Speaking to The Guardian via email, Booker-winning novelist Yaan Martel explained that he added his name to the letter because of "the egregious nature of the offence... something must be done urgently".

"I also added my name for a more practical reason.... The government of Bangladesh might be more subject to influence because of this letter than a government in the West, where letters, petitions and appeals and the like are always flying about, and politicians grown inured to them. My hope is that the government of Sheikh Hasina might actually be mortified by this

letter."

The authors' letter comes hard on the heels of the brutal killing of blogger Ananta Bijoy Das in Sylhet in quick succession of two more grisly attacks those took away the lives of Oyasiquir and Avijit over the last three months.

"We were shocked and horrified by the murder of 32-year-old blogger and editor Ananta Bijoy Das, who was hacked to death on his way to work by a masked gang wielding machetes in the city of Sylhet on 12 May. Prior to his death, Das had reportedly received a number of death threats from Islamist militants, and his name had appeared in two assassination lists published in the Bangladeshi media, alongside those of other secular bloggers described as anti-Islamic and blasphemous," the letter noted.

"Just months earlier, on 26 February, Avijit Roy, a fellow blogger and close friend of Das, was similarly killed. Roy and his wife, Rafida Ahmed Bonya, were viciously attacked by unknown assailants close to Dhaka University. Roy died soon afterwards and his wife was severely injured. A militant Islamist group has reportedly claimed the responsibility for the attack."

"A month later, on 29 March, blogger Oyasiquir Rahman Babu was murdered just 500 yards from his home in Begunbari, Dhaka. Police have claimed that the attackers targeted the 27-year-old blogger because they believed he had defamed Islam through his writings on websites, forums and social media. Two students from a madrasa [an Islamic school] have since been arrested in connection with Rahman's killing."

At least three other writers have been attacked or murdered in Bangladesh since 2013 and although there have been several arrests, no one has been held to account for any of these attacks, the letter pointed out.

"We are gravely concerned by this escalating pattern of violence against writers and journalists who are peacefully expressing their views. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right under Bangladesh's constitution and under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," said the renowned authors.

The Guardian quoted Jo Glenville, director of English PEN, describing the recent attacks as "a campaign of violence against bloggers and writers who are courageous enough to speak out in a

hostile culture for free speech."

"The government of Bangladesh must urgently address the climate of impunity and be seen to safeguard freedom of expression.... These shocking events have united writers throughout the world in an important show of solidarity," she added.

The Guardian approached the Bangladesh High Commission in London for comment on the open letter, but the mission did not respond.

PEN International is the world's leading association of writers, working to promote literature and defend freedom of expression around the world.

PEN was founded by the British poet, playwright and peace activist C.A. Dawson-Scott, as an international club providing space for writers to share ideas and as a forum, uniting writers irrespective of their culture, language or political opinion.

With 149 PEN centres in over 100 countries worldwide, the platform connects an international community of writers from its Secretariat in London.

Bush more hated

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as a figure of hate in a new study of history's biggest heroes and villains, reports Mail Online.

Albert Einstein, meanwhile, beat Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King and even Jesus Christ to be crowned the world's biggest hero.

This is according to the opinions of almost 7,000 students from 37 countries including Argentina, Pakistan, South Korea, Italy, and the US.

The students, who had an average age of 23, were asked to give their opinions on 40 figures and significant events throughout world history.

It revealed some surprising results, with George W Bush sitting alongside the world's most hated dictators.

The authors suggest that "the impact of time" explains the strange results.

For instance, while Stalin and Genghis were "responsible for innumerable more deaths", memory of Bush's presidency is more recent.

The university students had to rate on a scale from one to seven how positive and how negative the events and figures presented were.

The heroes appear to be scientists, discoverers and people who fought for liber-

ties. They include Mahatma Gandhi, Isaac Newton, Buddha and Abraham Lincoln.

Among the top 10 villains were Genghis Khan, Mao, Lenin, Stalin and Qin Shi Huang.

National opinions tended to agree regarding the heroes, but were divided when it came to the villains.

There is greater disparity of opinion about the villains, said Dario Páez, a lecturer at UPPV/EHU-University of the Basque Country.

"The same figure may be very negatively rated in one country, or not very negatively or even very positively in another part of the world."

That would be the case of Osama bin Laden, for example.

When the students were asked to respond spontaneously about who the most important figures in history were, names of political or military leaders were given.

Researchers believe this is because the things that occurred to the students were wars, conflicts and power struggles.

But when the questions were closed ones and they sat down to think about them, the same students attached greater importance to scientists and other humanitarian figures.

