



Indonesian hardline Muslim group the Islamic Defender Front together with Forum Umat Islam activists burn an effigy of a Buddhist monk while holding a rally in support of Rohingya Muslims outside the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta yesterday. Meanwhile, protesters hold up a banner in Yangon yesterday ahead of a demonstration against Rohingya boat migrants originating from Myanmar, who are largely seen there as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and referred to as "Bengali".

PHOTO: AFP

Rohingyas whisked away

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account of the woman, who identified herself as Arafa. Like many Rohingya, she uses only one name. But six other villagers said they were among the scores of Rohingya taken off from the boat.

It was not clear why the traffickers would only take the Rohingya off the boat. Matthew Smith, the executive director of the Southeast Asia-based Fortify Rights group, has said in testimony to the U.S. Congress that Myanmar's security forces are complicit in and profit from the trafficking. The government has dismissed the accusation.

Last week, Reuters reported that at least eight people found on the boat were Rohingya. The government, which had initially said all on board were Bangladeshi, said eight were "Bengalis" from Myanmar, the term it uses for the Rohingya.

Zaw Htay, an official in the president's office, said on Tuesday he was not aware that any other people were on the boat, other than the Bangladeshi and the eight "Bengalis".

"Our office did not get any information that some of them left before," he told Reuters.

The Myanmar government invited United Nations officials to meet the Bangladeshi migrants and the event was given wide publicity on state television.

After a crackdown on people smugglers in Thailand blocked trafficking routes earlier this month and forced them to abandon some ships, thousands of migrants have washed ashore in Malaysia and Indonesia. Others are stranded on trafficking boats off the shores of several Southeast Asian countries.

The migrant boats contain a mix of people from Bangladesh seeking to escape poverty at home as well as Rohingya, Indonesian and Malay authorities have said.

US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said last week during a visit to Myanmar that the majority of the more than 3,000 migrants who have landed on Malaysian and Indonesian shores this month were Rohingya Muslims fleeing from "the desperate conditions they face" in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

Rakhine Chief Minister Maung Maung Ohn later told Reuters: "I am disappointed by, and completely disagree and reject such unfounded allegations by the United States."

"This [migration] is human trafficking, not [due to] political or religious discrimination at all."

Other Myanmar officials have said the Bangladeshi claim to be Rohingya to receive UN aid.

Most of Myanmar's 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims are stateless and live in apartheid-like conditions in Rakhine state. Almost 140,000 were displaced in deadly clashes with majority Buddhists in Rakhine in 2012. They are denied citizenship and have long complained of state-sanctioned discrimination.

About 100,000 have fled overseas since 2012, according to the Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group.

The boat seized by the Myanmar navy was at anchor for about two months off the coast of Myanmar to load up before it was supposed to set sail for Malaysia, the seven villagers and two community leaders, who did not want to be named, told Reuters.

At the time it was filled with about 200 Bangladeshi and around 150-200 Rohingya, Thailand launched its crackdown on traffickers.

Small fishing boats started coming up to the ship and began offloading the Rohingya for about a week before it was brought ashore by the navy last Thursday, the seven Rohingya migrants who came back from the ship told Reuters.

The jobless woman who gave her name as Arafa said she was trying to join her husband in Malaysia and was allowed off the ship for free. Most others had to pay traffickers between \$200 and \$300 to return to the same villages they tried to escape weeks earlier.

One of them was Mohamed Anyis, 18, from a village close to Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state. He befriended some of the Bangladeshi men during his two-month stay on the ship.

"We shared scarce food rations and helped the weakest men together," said Anyis.

The migrants were beaten with metal rods and given only two cups of water and a handful of rice a day, Anyis and Arafa said. Anyis still had numerous white scars on his hands and ankles which he said came from repeated beatings.

"As we waited, six Bangladeshi men died of exhaustion. The crew threw their bodies into the sea," he said.

Anyis, Arafa and other villagers separately recognised and correctly named several of the Bangladeshi in photographs Reuters took at the ceremony where the Bangladeshi men were presented to the UN officials, confirming they spent weeks on the same boat.



8 'traffickers'

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Bagerhat, Mohammad Ali, 19, of Jhalakathi, and Helal Uddin Rana, 21, of Pirojpur.

Police rescued Rakib Hossain, 27, of Shariatpur and Mohammad Hasan, 18, of Jhalakathi, who were supposed to be "trafficked" to Bangalore of India through a border in Bagerhat. The two lives in the EPZ area.

Acting on a tip-off, police raided Bank Colony area around 10:30am and picked up the five from Rana's house, said Abul Kalam Azad, officer-in-charge of EPZ Police Station.

The rescued victims were supposed to be sent to one Mamun in Bagerhat bus stand area yesterday. Later, Mamun would send them to one Monir in Bangalore through a border in Bagerhat, said the police official, quoting the victims.

Selim, Ali and Rana were jointly supposed to get Tk 10,000 from Mamun for each of the victims, he said.

The victims were lured into going to Bangalore with promises of jobs with monthly salaries of Tk 25,000 to 30,000, the OC said.

However, the "human traffickers" did not demand any money from the India-bound people, he added.

In another incident, five more "human traffickers" were held in Cox's Bazar Sadar and Teknaf upazilas, reports our district correspondent, quoting police and Rab.

Around 9:45am, police nabbed three "listed human traffickers" -- Kala Mia, Samsul Alam and Shafi Alam -- from Nilar Leda village of Teknaf upazila, said Ataur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Teknaf Model Police Station.

A Rab team arrested Nur Hafez and Hasan Sharif from Khodaibari village of Cox's Bazar Sadar upazila early yesterday for their alleged involvement in human trafficking, said Maj Ziaur Rahman, company commander of Cox's Bazar Rab camp.

Locals contradict

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as a surprise.

"I have lived here for 30 years and I have seen many Rohingya, and they are always in bad shape," said Sani, 80, referring to the Muslim Rohingyas who flee persecution in Myanmar.

Emaciated Rohingya routinely approach his small farm to beg for food, water and clothing.

"We do what we can. And if they are not able to stand or walk, we call the authorities who take them away," he said.

Malaysian police say a total of 139 gravesites and 28 recently abandoned camps had been found, capable of housing hundreds of people.

'BLINDERS AND EARMUFFS'

Malaysia's government initially denied such brutal sites could exist on its soil. "I am shocked," Home Minister Zahid Hamidi declared when announcing the discovery on Sunday.

But activists say they have fed authorities evidence for years, yet nothing was done.

"In Malaysia, they've had the blinders and earmuffs on and have let these networks operate with impunity," said Amy Smith, executive director of human rights group Fortify Rights.

The Malaysian police force is criticised by reform advocates as unprofessional, corrupt and prone to brutal treatment of detainees.

"For trafficking to grow to the scale it did, you must have strong players. You need traffickers, authorities and also local people involved," said Aegle Fernandez, of Malaysian migrant-rights group Tenaganita.

Deputy Home Minister Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar vowed investigations would be pursued aggressively.

"If investigations reveal police, immigration, even the military or any other people were involved, we will not con-

done any of it," he told AFP.

MALAYSIAN COPS BEING PROBED

Malaysian police are investigating 12 of their officers to determine whether they had links to mass graves at human-trafficking camps found in the remote north, a top official was quoted as saying yesterday.

Four of the officers had been arrested during various police investigations since early last year, Deputy Home Minister Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar was quoted as saying by The Malaysian Insider news portal.

"We will have to see whether or not there are any links to the camps," Wan Junaidi was quoted saying. "Because the arrests were made in the north, we suspect there may be some connection."

US FOR FULL INVESTIGATION

The United States yesterday urged Malaysian authorities to carry out a full investigation into the grisly discovery of mass graves at human-trafficking camps and charge those behind the killings.

"We understand Malaysian law enforcement and security authorities are actively investigating these findings, and we encourage a transparent, credible and expeditious effort," a State Department spokesman told AFP.

"We urge Malaysian authorities to investigate fully these deaths and camps, and prosecute those responsible,"

ANTI-ROHINGYA PROTEST

IN MYANMAR

Several hundred Buddhist nationalists protested in Yangon yesterday against mounting international pressure for Myanmar to stem the exodus of Muslim Rohingya migrants and aid those still stranded at sea.

Demonstrators, including Buddhist monks, shouted "Don't insult our country!" and "There are no Rohingyas in Myanmar" in angry chants aimed mainly at the United Nations.

Refugee camps

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not finalised as they did not get the official decision yet. The cabinet has to approve the plan for the relocation to happen.

In November last year, the prime minister during a meeting with local officials of Chittagong expressed her desire to relocate the Rohingya refugees to a convenient place, he added.

Currently, around 32,000 refugees are living in two camps -- Kutupalang in Ukhiya and Nayapara in Teknaf -- in Cox's Bazar bordering Myanmar. The camps are jointly run by the Bangladesh government and the UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency.

In addition, more than 3 lakh unregistered Rohingya refugees live in Cox's Bazar and adjacent districts.

The undocumented Rohingyas live scattered, often within the local com-

munities, moving about freely in the region and carrying out criminal activities, according to sources in the local administration.

Repatriation of Rohingya refugees has remained a major irritant between Bangladesh and Myanmar since 1991-1992 when a few hundred thousand Rohingyas, a minority Muslim population of Myanmar, fled their homes in northern Rakhine state due to state-sponsored persecutions and took shelter in Bangladesh.

Though many of them were repatriated in phases till 2005, the Myanmar government has kept the process stalled for the last 10 years.

Thousands of persecuted Rohingya migrants attempted perilous journeys by boat to Southeast Asia and ended up in the jungles of the Thai coasts, according to newspaper reports.

200 of those rescued are 'Bangladeshis'

Says initial report by missions in Myanmar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two hundred people, who were rescued from the Bay of Bengal by the Myanmar authorities last week, have reportedly been identified as Bangladeshi, according to the preliminary report of a team of Bangladesh missions in Myanmar.

The six-member team, comprised of officials from the Bangladesh embassy in Yangon and Bangladesh consulate in Sittwe, visited the temporary relief camp in Rakhine state on Monday and Tuesday and extensively interviewed the rescued ones to know their citizenship.

A senior official at the foreign ministry in Dhaka told The Daily Star that the team yesterday sent to the ministry a list of the 200 people with their

details for the final verification of their citizenship.

He said the foreign ministry instantly forwarded the list to home ministry for further necessary actions.

The home ministry was asked to conduct the verification as early as possible so that the government could arrange a quick repatriation of the 200 if they were indeed Bangladeshi citizens, the official added.

After the rescue of 208 people from the sea on May 21, Myanmar officials claimed that all the boatpeople were Bangladeshi.

Meanwhile, the boatpeople were relocated to a temporary relief camp in Taungpyo Letwe Township on Monday so that they could be repatriated conveniently, reported a local newspaper.

Trips so funny

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The senior home secretary has to wait for the return of the state minister who plans to go to Belgium from Berlin. He is supposed to be back on June 2.

What is puzzling is that expatriates in Germany have been enrolling themselves for MRPs at the embassy since March. Yet, the project director and the state minister felt the need for its inauguration going there in person, spending the taxpayers' money.

Sources in the passport office said they were supposed to visit Berlin in March but they couldn't as the minister had another overseas trip then. The 18 passports were ready early last month but their delivery was withheld for over a month since the minister wanted to do it himself, and justify his visit.

Senior Home Secretary Mozammel Haq may not be able to visit any of the three countries even after the return of the state minister from Europe. Home ministry officials said the senior secretary would be getting ready to visit Brazil for MRP inauguration.

They said the Latin American country was much nicer a place to visit than



Asaduzzaman Khan



Mozammel Haq Khan



Brig Gen Masud Rezwan

Malaysia or the UAE. Interestingly, the MRP project director too is lobbying to go to Brazil.

Only last month, the state minister for home spent 10 days in Spain with five officials of his ministry and the MRP project.

The reason was inauguration of MRP issuance for the Bangladeshis there.

Before their trip to Spain, both the state minister and the project director went to Australia to hand over just one laptop to the Bangladesh embassy in Canberra. Both have daughters studying in Australia.

The state minister also visited

Uzbekistan, France, Russia and Japan.

Many in the Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP) believe there is no need for such inauguration, spending the taxpayers' money, since the matter is merely about technical and software integration.

Such inaugurations took place in 60 foreign missions so far and every time ministers or senior officials of the ministry and the DIP went.

"A race is on among all in the ministry to grab foreign trips. They are very selective in this regard," said an official of the home ministry, requesting anonymity.

Foreign trips in the name of MRP

143-year-old law needs change

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the law commission chairman said.

"We have not included this provision [section 155 (4)] in our proposals. We don't want the existence of such a provision in the new evidence law," Justice ABM Khairul Haque, chairman of the law commission, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said a rape victim deals with an extreme trauma.

"Moreover, allowing the accused to question her character during trial means forcing the victim to face a double blow," said Justice Haque, also a former chief justice, in defence

of abolishing the controversial provision.

He said the law commission had almost completed drafting the proposals for the new evidence act.

"We have dropped many provisions from the existing law and drafted new ones," he added.

On completion of the draft, the law commission would hold views-exchange meetings with legal experts before sending the proposals to the law ministry for transforming those into laws, said the law commission chief.

Asked about the use of this provi-

sion, a lawyer, who practices in Dhaka district judges and metropolitan magistrate courts, said counsels of accused of rape ask indecent questions maligning the character of a rape victim which is embarrassing for the victim and her family members attending the court proceedings.

Though the controversial provision has been there for over 143 years, no successive governments in independent Bangladesh has moved to repeal it.

Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha on Tuesday at a programme spoke for changes in the controversial

provision and urged women leaders to raise their voice against it.

"What can be more unfortunate than this when the accused during trial raise question about the character of a woman who seeks justice after losing her honour," said the chief justice.

He said such a provision existed in the evidence act in India, and one rape victim died of heart attack in a court as counsels of the accused were raising questions about her character. Following the incident, the Indian government has amendment the provision.