

# 'Only one body per grave'

Malaysia says about 139 graves in trafficking camps

REUTERS, Wang Kelian

The 139 graves uncovered near people-smuggling camps in northern Malaysia appear to hold only one body each, Malaysia's deputy home minister said on Thursday, after earlier suspicions that they could contain multiple corpses of trafficked migrants.

"There is no mass grave. This is one person, one grave," Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar told reporters at a news conference near the sites, adding that the bodies had been buried with "proper white wrapping" and ceremonial camphor had been used.

"The reason for the exhumation is to see whether a crime has been committed, violence was made against those people."

Four bodies have so far been recovered since Malaysian police forensic teams began digging this week at abandoned jungle camps along the Malaysia-Thailand border. Wan Junaidi said the task should be completed by the first week of June.

The dense forests of southern Thailand and northern Malaysia have been a major stop-off point for smugglers bringing people to Southeast Asia by boat from Myanmar, most of them

Rohingya Muslims who say they are fleeing persecution, and Bangladesh.

The grisly discoveries in Malaysia followed the uncovering of similar graves on the Thai side of the border in early May, and the scale of the finds has raised questions about the level of official complicity on both sides of the border.

Wan Junaidi had said on Wednesday that 12 Malaysian police officials had been detained as a result, but on Thursday clarified that only two were directly connected with the discovery of the graves near the border village of Wang Kelian.

"Actually, two of them are suspects connected to the graves at Wang Kelian," the minister said. "The remainder are connected to human trafficking and to the operation we started in 2014. No connection to the graves."

He said the two police officers were suspected of involvement in transporting the migrants, but did not elaborate.

Thailand launched a crackdown on the camps - where migrants were typically held until a ransom was paid - after finding at least 36 bodies on its side of the border in early May, after which traffickers abandoned thousands of migrants in overloaded boats in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

## He's our son!

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Indonesia.

Sabbir, who would now turn 23, and his friend Ishtiaque Bin Mahmud Uday, both students of Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, went on a trip to the island along with 32 fellow students in April last year to celebrate the Bangla New Year.

A joyful trip turned tragic in a simple twist of fate when six of the students drowned in the sea on April 14. Four bodies were recovered but those of Sabbir and Uday could not be found.

Around 14 months after the tragic incident, when Sabbir's parents saw the AFP photograph in a newspaper on May 11, they came up with the startling claim.

"This is my son ... I can recognise him even from afar," Sabbir's mother Sheline Akther said, pointing at an emaciated man lying on a plastic sheet in the photo.

"This is how my son sleeps ... He has become very thin."

"Something deep inside me tells me that Sabbir, my dearest son, isn't dead. We'll get him back alive," the mother told The Daily Star at their Mohammadpur residence in the capital yesterday.

Soon after seeing the photo, they had contacted the foreign ministry and sought help in rescuing who they believe was their missing son. They also had emailed a photo of Sabbir to the Bangladesh mission in Indonesia the same day.

In response, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam on Wednesday told the parents that they had identified a total of 422 Bangladeshis among the trafficking victims at a camp in Aceh, but Sabbir was not among them.

"I called on his [the state minister's] phone and briefed him on what we had done in the past two weeks," said Sabbir's father Hasanur Rahman, a retired public servant.

The state minister has assured them of taking "all possible measures" to identify Sabbir, he added.

## A trip down the path of horror

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field in the ship for playing all kinds of games.

For the four friends, all aged around 18, it is beyond what could they possibly dream of.

Firstly, uncle Mizan had brought them all the way from Shariatpur to Teknaf in Cox's Bazar to show them the beauty of the sea. And now he managed everything so that the four friends can go to Malaysia in his friend's ship without any expense at all!

"Hurry up, get in the CNG," said Mizan, who according to what his neighbour in Shariatpur Nur Alam knows, is a businessman based in Teknaf. "Something has suddenly come up and I'll join you later," he told them.

Alam doesn't even bids him bye because he believed the man "who has convinced owner of the Malaysia-bound ship to arrange separate seats and computers for each of the four" would definitely be part of this "beautiful journey".

"On your behalf, I will pay him a minor amount in fare for this journey, after which you will get lucrative jobs in Malaysia," he had told them.

Leaving the regular road, the three-wheeler entered a jungle leading to a small hut.

As they get down, 2/3 people throw them into the hut, took away all their belongings including mobile phones, moneybag and even their trousers. They gave them lungi to wear.

As Alam attempted to resist them, they swooped on him, pinned him to the ground and took away everything.

"Nine people were already waiting there, all looking like panicked to the core," Alam said while recalling the December 2013 incident that brought him to the Ranong Immigration Detention Centre in Thailand's southern Ranong province.

The Ranong governor gave The Daily Star special access to the centre on May 26 so that people can realise how risky and fatal can be the arduous journey Nur Alam took in a fit of fantasy.

"When there were 14 of us, they forced us onto a small boat later."

After a three-hour journey, they were taken on what the traffickers term

"ship", which is a modified fishing trawler.

"During midnight, the ship started moving," said Shahabuddin, a 23-year-old fish trader from Khuruskul area of Cox's Bazar who had already been brought to the trawler when Alam was taken there.

One broker named Aminul, a Myanmar citizen who moved to Cox's Bazar several years ago, had convinced Shahabuddin to go to Malaysia with a promise of job for just Tk 1.8 lakh though he used to charge Tk 2 lakh from others.

"He gave me this concession because my sister was married to a man who lives near his house in Gunapara village," Shahabuddin said.

He was picked up on a small boat at a 'Malaysia Airport' -- so named because of the destination -- at Badar Mokam area in Cox's Bazar Sadar upazila.

### PREPARATION

"As the journey was long, I bought dry food including bread, chira, apple, juice and water worth Tk 1,500," said Shahabuddin, who also bought a blanket.

Asked where he got the food in the remote area, both Alam and Shahabuddin said shops have been set up near every 'Malaysia Airport' and are making brisk money selling such foods to the Malaysia-bound people.

### UNCERTAIN JOURNEY

When Shahabuddin was led to the ship, a Rohingya broker named Ayub forced him to enter the bottom of the three-storied trawler. "The accommodate a few hundred people in the small ship, wood planks are used to make floors," he said.

A total of 474 people, including 30 women and seven children, were forced into the trawler before it started for Thai coast. It became so crowded that the victims could just manage to huddle together lowering their heads, so that it did not bump into the wooden floor.

Seven Arakanese citizens carrying whips made of rope and thick cable would stand guard and beat people on any trivial pretext. "To spread panic so that everyone complies with their order, they would beat people more during the first few days," said Nur Alam.



Rohingya women gather by the coast in a confinement area for migrants at Kuala Cankoi in Aceh yesterday. The women were part of nearly 500 boatpeople rescued by Indonesian fishermen off the east coast of Aceh on May 10.

PHOTO: AFP

## Trafficking rides on Rohingya crisis

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landed on the shores of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, drawing international attention to a crisis in Southeast Asia.

According to the IOM, an estimated 25,000 Southeast Asian migrants took to the seas in the first three months of 2015.

Minority Rohingya Muslims have been fleeing persecution in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar for decades, and paying human traffickers with flimsy boats to take them away from violence and state-sanctioned discrimination.

And for years, Southeast Asia has quietly ignored the issue, partly because of a policy of not publicly criticising each other's governments. But recently the problem became too big to overlook.

The foreign ministry sources said the Bangladesh delegation at the meeting will highlight the plight of Myanmar's 500,000 Rohingyas living illegally in Bangladesh.

Dhaka strongly believes that until and unless the Rohingya problems are solved, this type of irregular, illegal and risky migration cannot be fully stopped.

Besides, Bangladesh will inform the meeting about the government's all-out efforts to halt illegal migration and steps taken to enforce the legal mecha-

nism to stop any illegal migration from the country.

Dhaka has also ordered the Border Guards of Bangladesh, Coastguard and Navy to strengthen vigilance in the border, especially in its territorial sea in Bay of Bengal so that no such risky boat journey or any illegal migrants go through its border.

### ACTION PLAN

Three international organisations will jointly propose a 10-point action plan at the meeting to tackle the Southeast Asia migrant crisis, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) said yesterday.

The agencies, UNHCR, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), have already shared the 10-point action plan with the concerned governments and proposed concrete steps to address the regional challenge of helping people who are risking their lives on smugglers' boats, a spokesperson said.

"UNHCR hopes the meeting on May 29 involving governments will agree on joint action to tackle the humanitarian crisis and address the root of the outflow," said Vivian Tan, UNHCR senior regional public information officer.

This involves coordinating rescue attempts at sea and allowing people to

come ashore to receive medical attention and food, she said, according to The Nation.

### 'TOP PRIORITY'

The rights of those people stranded at sea or in holding camps should be the top priority, said Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"Regional governments should work with the United Nations and others to agree on binding solutions to this human tragedy -- not sweep it under the rug as they have done for years," said Brad Adams, HRW's Asia director, in a statement.

HRW has called for "unimpeded and unconditional access" for international-recognised organisations like UNHCR and IOM to rescued migrants and refugees in order to assess their claims for refugee status, CNN reports.

The advocacy group has also called for better search and rescue capabilities now and in the future, and urged participants at the meeting to demand that Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries permit disembarkation of seaborne migrants.

HRW says they should "exert pressure on Burma [Myanmar] as the main source of the problem," and provide basic health, education, and other services for Rohingya in an effort to curb illegal migration.

"This regional meeting will only be a success if every government commits

to effective search and rescue operations, meeting the protection needs of refugees, prosecuting traffickers, and resolving the root causes that drive these desperate people onto boats," Adams said.

### ANY HOPE FOR ROHINGYAS?

Myanmar's government denies the Rohingya citizenship, making them effectively stateless. It views the estimated 1.3 million Rohingya living in dire conditions in western Rakhine state as illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Officials initially said that none of the boat people came from Myanmar, and threatened to boycott the talks if the word "Rohingya" appeared on the invitation. It was left out.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott: "Nope, nope, nope," when asked if Australia would resettle any of the Rohingya or Bangladeshis. "We are not going to do anything that will encourage people to get on boats."

Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia agree that the key to solving the migrant crisis is addressing "the root cause" -- which means the situation in Myanmar. It's not an easy task when Myanmar officials are loath to even utter the word "Rohingya."

The US is prepared to take a leading role in resettling the most vulnerable Rohingya refugees, according to State department spokeswoman Marie Harf.



FROM LEFT ... Shahbuddin, Noor-e-Alam and Nur Alam at the Ranong Immigration Detention Centre.

PHOTO: SHAMIM ASHRAF

"With our dreams of a lucrative job in Malaysia already shattered, what we were doing round the clock was pray -- none could rest nor sleep."

Many of the victims had nervous breakdown and fell sick. "There was no doctor. If you fell sick, you must die untreated," Shahabuddin said.

### DEATH FOR WATER, FOOD

For those like Nur Alam whose money was seized before the start of the journey, the traffickers used to provide some rice with dry red chili twice -- once at 10:00am and later at 3:00pm -- and around 25ml water thrice.

For Noor Alam, a 25-year-old fisherman from Teknaf, who was duped to

Katabuniya area in the upazila and was later taken on a boat forcibly, the food and water was far less than one could survive on.

"That's why I asked for some food when my stock ended after a week," he said while talking about his voyage in November 2013 in another trawler that was carrying 450 people to Thai coast.

A guard beat him up with a whip made of thick electric cable so hard that he started to bleed from his head and left knee, he said showing injury marks. He was left in that Condition.

Failing to bear with the thirst, four men took their own lives jumping into

the sea.

"The guards beat up another six so badly that they started to vomit and fell sick. Seeing that they were lying there occupying a lot of space, the guards threw them into the sea," he shivered while recalling the event.

But Noor-e-Alam, father of a son, aged two, and a daughter, aged one, said it was the most unbearable sight when the guards used to beat up the kids in front of their parents for seeking water.

Shahabuddin and Alam were also witness to similar brutality.

A 40-year-old man from Jessore who was duped to Cox's Bazar in the name of traveling and later taken on a boat forcibly, was sent to the bottom cellar on the seventh day of their journey.

"The man complained that he had heart diseases and was feeling bad. He vomited twice and lay on the floor." Seeing him of no value, the guards pulled him up and flung in the waters.

### ANCHORING IN THE DARKNESS

Nine days after starting, the trawler carrying Shahabuddin and Alam reached sea on Myanmar-Thai border. The brokers handed over the victims to three smaller boats. The boats took them near the coast and forced them to get down in chest-high water.

"Later, we had to wade through water and mud for two hours before we reached a hill around 3:00pm."

The victims, exhausted to the bone, were very happy when they were served a full meal -- a boiled egg, some rice and salt -- at 8:00am at the rubber garden camp in the hill slope. In the afternoon the next day, the victims were taken on mini trucks, each carrying eight, which were covered with thick sheets so that none can understand what's inside.

The trucks travelled for eight hours to take them to a camp in Padang Besar, a border town on the Malaysia-Thailand border in the Sadao district in Thailand's Songkhla Province.

There, 107 victims were kept in three rooms in a brown-coloured one-storey building.

The trafficked people are mostly taken to the hilly or jungle areas along the Thai coast in Songkhla, Sotun, Ranong and Phuket provinces.

### RANSOM, SLAVERY

In the morning, a man speaking Arakanese gave Shahabuddin a mobile phone and asked him to call home. "He told me to pay the Tk 1.8 lakh saying otherwise my future will be uncertain." His family sold two of their cows for Tk 30,000 and collected Tk 50,000 from some relatives to pay the ransom three days later.

As per the directives of the Arakanese broker, Shahabuddin's family contacted a broker named Faruk in Teknaf on a mobile phone number provided by the brokers in Thailand and paid him the money.

Alam had to pay Tk 2 lakh though. "The Arakanese broker said they would take us to Malaysia the day we pay the ransom."

Those who have paid the ransom were given a red ribbon to tie in their hands as a mark of payment, and there were 84 lucky ones to get it.

### Arrest: bad luck or blessing?

Two mini trucks came and took away 26, 13 in each vehicle, as those who couldn't pay waited for unknown future.

"As we were waiting to get in the third vehicle, police raided the building and took us to Hat Yai immigration office in Songkhla."

Meanwhile, two brokers, who were also arrested with them, advised the Bangladeshis to introduce themselves before police as Myanmar citizens saying "it would help us get release in just two days". Alam and Shahabuddin complied, but no avail.

As the Hat Yai office became overcrowded with 600 arrestees, authorities shifted 200 of them, including Alam, Shahabuddin and Noor-e-Alam, to Ranong Immigration Detention Centre on January 24 last year.

"In just two months, the two brokers got release from here. But we're still languishing here," said Noor-e-Alam.

The three, who are the only Bangladeshi citizens among 240 at the centre now, said they're lucky that they had failed to board the truck bound for Malaysia.

Now waiting for repatriation, Shahabuddin said: "We could by now have turned into another group's slaves and be working in any rubber garden."