

# Army link not found yet

Thai deputy PM tells conference; IOM seeks \$26m to address human trafficking issue

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Amid different quarters' insistence that Thailand must take steps against its army and police officials involved in human trafficking, the country's deputy prime minister denied having found any army personnel's link with the trade.

"We agree that high ranking officials were involved in trafficking of people. There are police among them. But so far, we haven't found any army officials to be involved in this," Deputy PM General Tanasak Patimapragorn, also the foreign minister of the country, said at press conference during a Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean in Bangkok.

Investigation was on and if any army officer was found involved, the Thai government will take action against them, said Patimapragorn.

As representatives from 17 countries directly and indirectly affected by "irregular migration" in the Indian Ocean put their heads together to find solution to the crisis dogging Southeast Asia, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) sought US\$6 million to address the issue.

Thailand called the special meeting of senior officials and experts from 17 countries and three international organisations to seek a solution to the migrant situation in the Indian Ocean.

Representatives from Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran are attending the meeting.

Besides, officials from the US, Japan and Switzerland are participating as observers along with officials from international organisations, including the UN refugee agency, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the IOM.

Addressing a press conference after opening of the meeting being held at Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel, the Thai deputy PM said 44 officials have been arrested for their link with the illegal human trade.

When asked why the Thai government did not act to bust the traffickers' network although the trade has been continuing for many years, General Tanasak Patimapragorn said it is very hard to keep eyes on the bordering deep jungles.

"In some places, it takes three days to cover just 1 kilometre. You can't see everything well. As a result, air surveillance doesn't help much."

The issue is not new and the incumbent Thai government is now trying its best to stop this, he said. "We are doing it like never done before. Our friends and countries concerned are very

happy with our steps."

In his opening remarks earlier at the meeting, the Thai deputy PM stressed that the issue of irregular maritime migration in the region needs to be addressed in a collective and sustainable manner.

"The influx of irregular migrants in the Indian Ocean has reached an alarming level. Sadly, we have witnessed desperate migrants leaving their homes and risking their lives. The situation has affected various countries in the region. No country can solve this problem alone," he said, terming the problem "more complex than what we are seeing".

Malaysia and Indonesia also offered temporary shelter for the stranded migrants provided that the resettlement and repatriation process will be done in one year by the international community.

"On our part, Thailand remains ready as always to provide humanitarian assistance to these migrants by tripling our efforts," the Thai foreign minister said.

"Since May 26, Royal Thai Navy vessels have been deployed to serve as floating platforms to provide humanitarian assistance to those migrants at sea. Personnel on these floating vessels consist of the following: First, a medical team to provide treatment, food and water; Second, an investigation team to investigate the possibility of human trafficking activities; Third, a registration team to identify and prepare for possible solutions, including referrals to shelters offered by Indonesia and Malaysia. If disembarkation is absolutely necessary, the migrants will be treated first and foremost according to humanitarian principles under Thai laws."

## IOM SEEKS \$26M

Saying that the boat people crisis has left 10,000 estimated people affected and 5,000 estimated people in need of return and reintegration assistance, the IOM has placed an appeal for \$26 million to address the issue.

As per its demand placed before the meeting, \$12.8 million will be spent for temporary shelter and non-food items; \$1.4 million for heart and nutrition support; \$0.3 million for psychological support; \$10 million for return and reintegration assistance; and \$1.5 million for migration management support and coordination.

An estimated 58,000 people undertook an irregular and dangerous journey by boat in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in 2014, joined by another 25,000 in the first quarter of 2015. They are part of complex migratory movement including refugees, stateless people and economic migrants.



Delegates from 17 nations and observers pose for a group photo during an international meeting on migration in the Indian Ocean in Bangkok yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Good start but no major breakthrough

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Discussions need to continue," said IOM Director-General William Lacy Swing. "It cannot be a one-off."

Southeast Asia has been beset for years by growing waves of desperate migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar. In the last several weeks alone, at least 3,000 people have been rescued by fishermen or have made their way ashore in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Some are Bangladeshis who left their impoverished homeland in hope of finding jobs abroad. But many are Rohingya Muslims who have fled persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar.

At the start of the meeting, the UN's assistant high commissioner for refugees responsible for protection, Volker Turk, said there could be no solution if root causes are not addressed.

"This will require full assumption of responsibility by Myanmar toward all its people. Granting citizenship is the ultimate goal," he said. "In the interim ... recognising that Myanmar is their own country is urgently required (as well as) access to identity documents and the removal of restrictions on basic freedoms."

Htin Linn, the acting director of Myanmar's Foreign Affairs Ministry, shot back in a speech afterward, saying

Turk should "be more informed." He also cast doubt on whether "the spirit of cooperation is prevailing in the room. ... Finger pointing will not serve any purpose. It will take us nowhere."

The word "Rohingya" did not appear on the invitation for the meeting, after Myanmar threatened to boycott the talks if it did, and most people who spoke at yesterday meeting avoided saying it. Myanmar's government does not recognise Rohingya as an ethnic group, arguing instead they are really "Bangladeshis".

An official summary of the meeting included a list of proposals and recommendations that were "put forward," including ensuring the UN has access to migrants and addressing the issue's root causes. It was not clear that any of them had been agreed on, however, or that they would be implemented.

There were small signs of progress. Thai Foreign Minister Thanasak Patimapragorn said Bangkok agreed to allow the US military to operate flights out of Thailand to search for migrants stuck on boats -- one week after Washington put in a request to do so. And the US pledged \$3 million to help the IOM deal with the crisis, while Australia pledged \$4.6 million toward humanitarian assistance in Myanmar.

IOM Director-General William Lacy Swing said more than 160,000 people have fled into Southeast Asia since 2012, 25,000 of them this year.

Most countries in the region view the boat people as a burden, and refugees have been ping-ponged back and forth between Southeast Asian nations that have long tried to push them away.

However, Malaysia and Indonesia agreed this month to provide Rohingya with shelter for one year. It is unclear what will happen after that, though both countries have called on the international community to help with resettlement and the US has offered to take some in. Thailand has offered humanitarian help but not shelter.

"No country can solve this problem alone," Thanasak said at the start of yesterday's conference.

There were also pledges of money to help deal with the crisis from the United States, Australia and Japan.

"This is a very good beginning," Volker Turk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at the UNHCR, said after the meeting. "There is a strong paragraph on root causes in the agreement... There is a sense of opening from Myanmar that I welcome. There was a discussion about Rakhine State."

## THE FINAL STATEMENT

The final statement from the meeting included a paragraph that called for addressing factors in the areas of origin of migrants, including "promoting full respect for human rights" as well as investing in economic development. It did not mention Myanmar by name.

Myanmar signed off on the agreement, Htein Lin, director general at Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and head of the country's delegation told Reuters after the meeting.

"It's not only about Rohingya, in your terms - in our terms, not only for Bengalis," he said.

"The language (in the document) speaks for itself. For Myanmar, root causes are development and a sense of security for all people living in Rakhine state and the rest of Myanmar."

In his opening remarks to the meeting earlier, he had sharp words for those that blamed Myanmar for Southeast Asia's migrant crisis.

"You cannot single out my country," he told delegates. "In the influx of migration, Myanmar is not the only country."

One delegate said Myanmar had pushed for other participants not to use the term "Rohingya" and that most were respecting Myanmar's request.

Htein Lin said nobody had raised "the Rohingya question".

[Reuters, AP]

## Dhaka points at 'external factors'

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Ocean" in Bangkok.

While different international agencies working in the fields of trafficking, migration and cross-border crime identified many Bangladeshi victims as economic migrants, the Bangladesh delegation differed on this.

"We have sustained an average GDP growth rate of 6.2 percent over the last six years. We have reduced poverty by nearly 2 percent each year, and lifted 50 million people out of poverty during this time," the foreign secretary said.

With a limited resource base, Bangladesh has made impressive gains in

human development and attained almost all of the MDGs ahead of time, Shahidul Haque said.

"In such a context, there must be some other factors or forces at play beyond our immediate control that create vulnerability or false incentives for our people to risk their own lives at sea."

To identify these factors, "we may have to look for external factors and forces", said the secretary, who led a five-member delegation to the meeting, attended by representatives of 17 countries and three international agencies.

Citing initial estimates, the Bangladesh delegation said there are

about 30 percent of Bangladeshis among the victims recently rescued in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

"We shall arrange to conclude the nationality verification of these people within the shortest possible time, and shall repatriate them to Bangladesh preferably within a month or so," Shahidul Haque said.

Bangladesh is deeply concerned over the unfolding humanitarian tragedy in the Indian Ocean, and considers this to be "a direct challenge to our 'zero tolerance' approach to human trafficking", he continued.

The country is determined to go all the

way to stop and reverse this trend, he asserted.

"Since May 1, 2015, our Coast Guard has intercepted a number of boats in our waters and rescued 132 people and our naval forces remain on alert to go up to the high seas to rescue victims and bring the culprits to justice," the foreign secretary was quoted by the BSS as saying in the meeting.

In 2014, there were 682 trafficking related cases involving a total of 2,834 accused, and among those convicted, 12 were sentenced to life imprisonment, Shahidul Haque added.



Left from right, Nurjahan Begum holding a photo of her husband Al Amin, a trafficking victim of Tangail, along with her two kids and other family members. Relatives of some missing jobseekers in Sirajganj and Bogra.

PHOTO: STAR

## 3,000 from 20 districts

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Cox's Bazar, a local NGO, told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

Earlier, only the Cox's Bazar locals used to be the victims of human trafficking, but now people from almost all districts are falling into the trap, he added.

Shamol Kumar Nath, superintendent of Cox's Bazar police, said they had heard that some people were missing but it was difficult for them to get the exact number.

Around 100 cases had been filed in the district in connection with human trafficking and over 200 people had been arrested in the last few months, sources said.

In small groups, local and Myanmar human traffickers were active in Cox's Bazar. They gather jobseekers from remote districts.

In Jessore, most of the people who have gone missing are from Monirampur, Jhikorgachha and Sadar upazilas. The exact number of victims was unavailable but local NGOs claim over 1,000 people from the district were missing.

"We have recently arrested two top human traffickers who were involved in the crime for long. There are at least

eight cases on trafficking allegations in the district," Superintendent Anisur Rahman of Jessore police told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

In Sirajganj, over 300 people from five upazilas were missing after they had left their homes to seek their fortunes abroad.

The victims' families in Sirajganj Sadar, Belkuchi, Ullapara, Shahadpur and Chowhali upazilas urged the government to rescue them.

"The human traffickers threatened me over the phone and asked for Tk 2.5 lakh for my son's release. To save my son's life, I paid sold my farmland last month and paid them. But there is no information on my son yet," Sabeed Ali, father of missing Nur Alam, told The Daily Star correspondent last week.

Nur Alam had been missing since the first week of March after he left home to go to Malaysia through the sea, his family said.

Abdul Mannan of Sirajganj manpower office said they had information about 300 victims who had been smuggled out to different countries illegally by human traffickers.

In Satkhira, 27 jobseekers went missing in the last few months. Of



them, 12 hailed from a village of Kolaroya upazila.

"Abba, now I am throwing away my mobile phone. I can't talk to you anymore. We are 300 in a trawler with Sattar and Arif of our village," these were the last words of Azmol Morol to his father Sirajul Morol.

Like Sirajul, many family members do not know the whereabouts of their relatives after they left their homes.

Satkhira manpower office Assistant Director Sheikh Mustafizur Rahman told our Satkhira correspondent that they had received at least 27 letters from families of missing people.

Meanwhile, Faridpur Superintendent of Police Jamil Hasan said they had no definite number of victims but they had received information of 15 to 16 people who went missing in the district.

Besides, families of victims from Tangail, Narsingdi, Madaripur, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Chandpur, Joypurhat, Naogaon, Gaibandha, Habiganj, Patuakhali, Bogra, Munshiganj, Narayanganj, Magura and Rajbari were in the dark about the fate of their loved ones.

## Target revised Teesta deal?

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trying to explore the possibility of having a "revised" Teesta treaty signed then.

However, Bangladesh wants the original agreement, which could not be inked four years ago due to opposition from Mamata, to remain unchanged.

To help the issue, many proposals are on the table. They include a revised formula under which India and Bangladesh are looking at 46:46 percent sharing of water.

The rest of water will come from the regeneration of the river by the time it enters Bangladesh from India and reaches Dalia barrage in Lalmonirhat.

Out of its share, West Bengal, under the revised formula, has to part with 21 percent of water at Gazoldoba in North Bengal while another 25 percent would be added through regeneration by the time it would reach Dalia barrage, sources in New Delhi said yesterday.

To persuade Mamata, the federal Indian government is offering financial assistance to West Bengal for developing irrigation infrastructure in the state to use Teesta water particularly

during the dry season.

Sources pointed out that even now the state can only use 25 percent of Teesta water due to lack of irrigation infrastructure.

It is to be seen how Bangladesh and West Bengal would respond to the formula, sources added. It was not easy to convince Mamata of the revised formula on Teesta as water requirement for irrigation in vast areas of northern part of West Bengal is politically crucial for her.

The issue is crucial in view of the fact that if her government sacrificed the interests of North Bengal, it might cost her heavily in fresh assembly elections in the state. The polls are due by the first half of next year.

Mamata was unlikely to accept any formula on Teesta unless her government got any tangible assistance from the central Indian government in return.

For this, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, who has good equations with Mamata, has taken a lead role in trying to bring the West Bengal chief minister on board signing the Teesta deal during Modi's visit to Dhaka, said the sources.

Mamata's close aide and West Bengal Education Minister Partha Chatterjee and Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Syed Muazzem Ali are guarded on the possibility of signing the agreement.

Chatterjee said, "I believe the chief minister will not come in the way of the [Teesta] treaty as long as the interests of West Bengal are not affected by the proposed agreement."

Muazzem Ali told senior journalists of The Indian Express that he was hopeful about a "positive outcome" of the talks in Dhaka on the Teesta during Modi's visit.

He said if the internal discussions between the central government and those in West Bengal and Sikkim states, through which Teesta flows, reach a "conclusive decision," they would be very happy to sign the agreement.

The original Teesta treaty was expected to be signed during former Indian PM Manmohan Singh's Dhaka visit in 2011. But the signing was cancelled at the eleventh hour due to opposition from Mamata.

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