The route, which for most starts in North Arakan with a brief transit in Bangladesh, passes through Thailand and continues overland to Malaysia. The sea crossing lasts about one week. As most, if not all, boats are captured upon arrival, the itinerary via Thailand is deemed safer. Arrest in Malaysia would mean a longer detention period and eventual deportation across the border to Thailand. Complex networks of smugglers and brokers, mostly but not exclusively Rohingyas, are involved at various levels in transporting Rohingyas from North Arakan to Bangladesh, from Bangladesh to Thailand and, finally, overland from Thailand to Malaysia. The networks operate in collusion with law enforcement personnel in these four countries.

Until 21 March 2007, boat people arrested along the coast of South Thailand were briefly detained and subsequently deported ‘informally’ into a cease-fire zone in Burma close to Mae Sot. Brokers would release them upon payment of a fee of around $700 and carry them across Thailand to Malaysia. The Thai authorities later attempted to deport a few directly into the hands of the Burmese immigration authorities, probably as a test case, but these deportees were pushed back to Thailand the following day.

However, since the onset of the new sailing season in November 2007, the whereabouts of the boat people after initial detention remain unknown and a matter of serious concern. It is believed that the Thai immigration authorities hand them over to brokers in south Thailand who allegedly detain them near the Malaysian border until a fee is paid for them to be smuggled across. As on the Thai-Burmese border, brokers on the Thai-Malaysian border routinely beat their detainees to pressure them into arranging payment. Those unable to pay have reportedly been sold to plantation owners or fishing boats as bonded labour. Many ultimately reach Malaysia and find jobs as illegal migrants but many also disappear on the way. As the number of boat departures continues to rise, more and more families are desperately seeking news of missing relatives.

Responses in the region

The Burmese regime does not appear interested in stemming the movements of Rohingya boat people. In 2007, some boat people caught in Burma were briefly detained and released – after payment of a bribe – or simply towed back towards Thai territorial waters. However, more recently, a couple of boats landed on the Burmese coast and boat people were given seven-year jail sentences for having re-entered the country illegally.

So far, Bangladesh has only taken minor steps to counter the smuggling of Rohingya boat people. Since October 2007, Bangladesh law enforcement agencies have intensified raids at departure points and at Burmese border crossing points. A few people were even pushed back across the Naf River to Burma. Usually only passengers are caught – not the smugglers themselves, who

Myanmar’s forgotten people

Nyi Nyi Kyaw

The Rohingyas have a history which dates back to the beginning of the 7th century when Arab Muslim traders settled in Arakan (Rakhine).

They were recognised as an indigenous ethnic group by the U Nu government during the parliamentary era in the 1950s but lost their political and constitutional identity when the military government of General Ne Win promulgated the Citizenship Act of Burma in 1983. This effectively denied the Rohingyas recognition of their status as an ethnic minority group. Harsh discrimination against them soon followed.

The military junta maintains a clearly articulated stance on the Rohingyas. In a press release issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar on 26 February 1992, the government declared: “In actual fact, although there are [135] national races living in Myanmar today, the so-called Rohingyas people is not one of them. Historically, there has never been a ‘Rohingya’ race in Myanmar.”

In response to criticisms from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in April 2004, the junta stated that it had granted full and equal treatment to the Rohingyas, as with other races, in matters relating to birth and death registration, education, health and social affairs. Moreover, the junta also mentioned that the Rohingyas are listed as a Bengali racial group and recognised as permanent residents of Myanmar.

However, in practice, the rights of the Rohingya population remain greatly restricted. The presence of UNHCR and some other international NGOs in northern Rakhine State can help ameliorate the current plight of the Rohingyas but without political will from within the Myanmar military government, their plight cannot be resolved.

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