

## KEY FIGURES

**87,000**

Estimated irregular maritime departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border since June 2012

Over **200**

Possible deaths at sea in 2014 among those irregularly departing from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area

**USD 50-300**

Cost to board departure vessels in the Bay of Bengal

**USD 1,500-2,200**

Additional cost demanded by smugglers in transit

**USD 500**

Amount for which two individuals said they were sold to work on a fishing boat for three months

**9**

Boats reportedly intercepted by authorities in the first half of 2014

Over **7,000**

Persons of concern to UNHCR who travelled irregularly by sea in the Asia-Pacific region and are currently in detention facilities

**144**

Persons of concern to UNHCR in Malaysia who presented with symptoms of beriberi in the first half of 2014

## SOUTH-EAST ASIA

### IRREGULAR MARITIME MOVEMENTS

January – June 2014

## ROUTES

- Irregular maritime movements of mixed populations that include persons of concern to UNHCR have been prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region for many years, but movements through South-East Asia, largely originating from the Bay of Bengal, have increased at a particularly rapid rate following inter-communal violence in Myanmar in June 2012. Since then, some 87,000 people are estimated to have departed by sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area.



Fishing boats on the beach at Teknaf, Bangladesh.

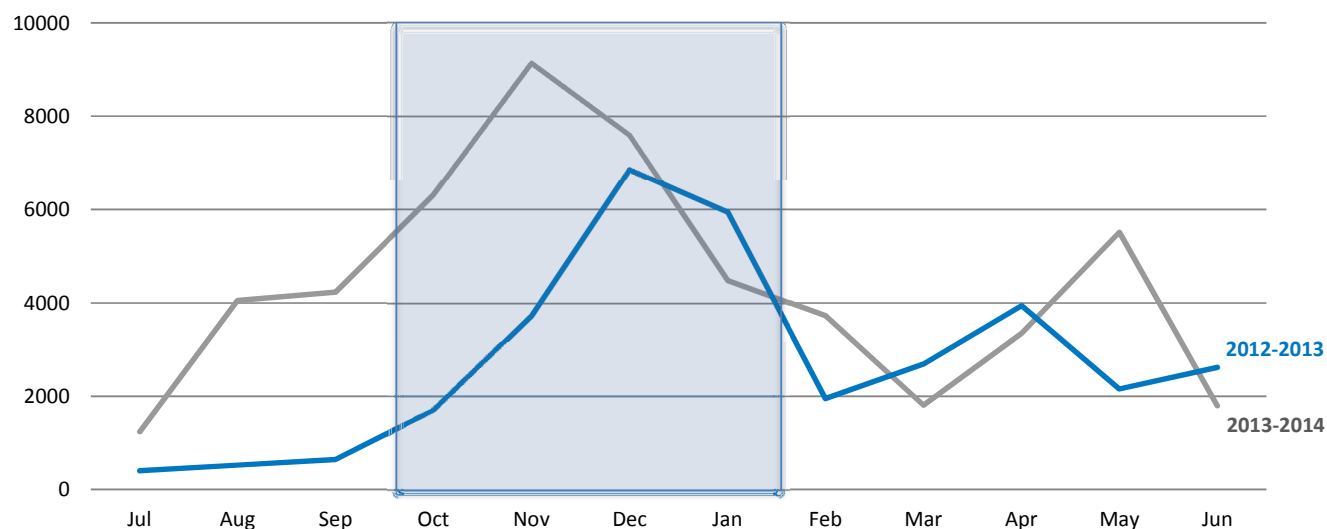
- This trend has continued through the first half of 2014, during which the main route of irregular maritime movement in South-East Asia remained the journey through the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime border to the Malaysia-Thailand maritime border. Other irregular maritime movements passing through South-East Asia followed routes through the Indian Ocean from South Asia and Indonesia to Australia, and across the Strait of Malacca from Malaysia to Indonesia.
- Although the precise number of people travelling on such routes is unknown and likely much greater than what has been reported, UNHCR is aware of over 20,000 irregular maritime departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area in the first half of 2014, in addition to hundreds who have attempted the boat journey to Australia.
- Given the high proportion and total number of persons of concern to UNHCR departing by sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, as well as a lack of access to those who travelled along other routes, this report largely focuses on the journey between the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and the Malaysia-Thailand border.
- Irregular maritime movements are by their nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. The information in this report is compiled from various sources, including direct interviews with persons of concern, implementing partners, media reports, and governments.

## DEPARTURE

- In the 12 months ending June 2014, UNHCR estimates that some 53,000 people departed irregularly by sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area in the Bay of Bengal, a 61 per cent increase from the previous 12 months.
- As in previous years, departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border peaked during the traditional sailing season from October to January. Since June 2012, over half of all estimated departures took place between the months of October and January.
- Irregular maritime departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border set out most frequently from Teknaf, Bangladesh, and from Maungdaw, Myanmar. Away from the border area, an estimated 7,500 additional departures have originated from the Sittwe area in Myanmar since June 2012.
- In the first half of 2014, Bangladeshi authorities reportedly arrested over 700 people (including smugglers and crew) attempting to depart irregularly by sea from Bangladesh.
- UNHCR interviewed recent maritime arrivals in Thailand and Malaysia who travelled on boats that accounted for as many as 10,000 departures since October 2013; 40 per cent of individuals interviewed by UNHCR were unaccompanied minors under the age of 18.
- Virtually all maritime arrivals in Thailand had intended to travel to Malaysia, where many had family members. Most were either referred to smugglers by family and friends or recruited from their villages by smugglers.
- Individuals departing from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border paid between USD 50-300 to board departure vessels. Small boats ferried groups of 5-30 passengers to larger fishing or cargo vessels with capacities typically ranging from 100-700 passengers.



**Estimated Irregular Maritime Departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border  
July 2012 – June 2014**



## TRANSIT

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- In the first half of 2014, nine boats travelling towards Australia carrying a total of 403 reported passengers were intercepted by Australian authorities under the aegis of Operation Sovereign Borders. Seven boats were returned to Indonesia; one boat was returned to Sri Lanka following what Australian authorities called “enhanced screening”—a form of accelerated procedures—of its 41 passengers; and 157 people who travelled on a boat from India were transferred from the Australian mainland to an offshore processing center on Nauru, where they remain detained (as of August 2014) pending an Australian High Court decision on how to process them.
- Across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, the majority of passengers on boats were men, but many ships also carried dozens of women and children often kept in separate quarters. Boat crews were generally armed and from either Myanmar or Thailand. Over 80 per cent of those interviewed by UNHCR spent between 7-15 days at sea, though some individuals said they were at sea for one to two months, their boats idle while waiting to take on additional passengers.
- Conditions on board varied; some individuals said they were fed regularly with rice and noodles, while others said they were not fed at all. Almost all individuals were confined in cramped spaces and prohibited from, or verbally and physically abused for, moving around.
- Those who reported harsher conditions said they saw several people die, and in two cases, possibly over 20 passengers who died. Deaths were attributed to illness, heat, lack of food and water, and severe beatings by the crew. Some passengers reportedly jumped off boats in desperation, and others went missing when, in one example, passengers were forced to swim ashore upon reaching Thailand.
- Extrapolating the number of deaths at sea reported by interviewees in Thailand, over 200 people may have died along the route beginning at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in 2014, at a similar rate to the some 800 people estimated to have died in the Mediterranean Sea in 2014. Anecdotally, deaths at sea in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea appear to have declined over the last year as smugglers plying this route have chartered larger and more seaworthy vessels.

## ARRIVAL

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- Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, over 7,000 persons of concern to UNHCR who travelled by sea remain in immigration detention facilities, including over 5,000 who are either in Australia or Australia’s offshore processing centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.
- UNHCR is aware of isolated maritime movements from Malaysia to Singapore and Timor-Leste, and has intervened with local authorities to ensure that persons of concern have access to asylum.

### In Thailand

- Upon arrival in Thailand, individuals interviewed by UNHCR said they were transported through the night in pickup trucks with 15-20 others, forced to sit or lie atop one another. They were taken to camps located in or around hills, jungles, and plantations, sequestered by wooden fences and under plastic sheeting. Camps were said to hold hundreds of people—including women and children—for various periods of time, with certain groups separated for departure to Malaysia depending on when and whether individuals were able to make payments to smugglers.
- Many individuals had not been aware of any additional costs to be paid post-departure, while some understood that further payment would be required upon arrival in Thailand or Malaysia, either in cash or indentured labor. Additional costs demanded by smugglers post-departure generally ranged from USD 1,500-2,200.

- Demands for additional amounts were made in transit or after individuals arrived in Thailand by calling their relatives in Malaysia, Myanmar, or Bangladesh, and were accompanied by threats or, when payment was not immediate, severe beating and prolonged detention in a smugglers' camp for up to six months. Payments were made either in hard currency, by bank transfer, or through mobile payment systems such as bKash.
- A few interviewees paid the full amount in vain—or were forced to pay twice—when the journey went awry, either because their camp was raided after payment had been made, they were deported from and returned to Thailand only to fall into the hands of another smuggler, or a smuggler appeared to have absconded with the payment without handing it over to his superior.
- Several of those interviewed by UNHCR said that people had died in the camps where they were held, either from physical injuries or illness. Some fell seriously ill themselves, losing sensation and mobility likely because they were suffering from beriberi, which is caused by malnutrition and vitamin B<sub>1</sub> deficiency. Three individuals were effectively paralyzed, which led to their being abandoned by smugglers when their camps were raided by Thai authorities.
- The length of time spent in smugglers' camps by those caught in raids carried out by Thai authorities ranged from several days to up to seven months at the time they were caught.
- As of 7 July 2014, some 233 persons identified by Thai authorities as Rohingya remained in Thai detention centers or shelters. In addition to distributing non-food items such as hygiene kits and basic clothing, UNHCR has been conducting counseling and information sessions at shelters to sensitize persons of concern to the risks smugglers may expose them to, namely extortion, exploitation, and serious danger to personal safety.

## UNHCR Intervention

**UNHCR is actively involved in the protection of persons of concern who traveled by sea in South-East Asia. In the first half of 2014, UNHCR made, and continues to make, interventions such as:**

- In Thailand, UNHCR is working with relevant authorities and UNICEF on securing access to education for Rohingya children in accordance with Thailand's "Education for All" policy. Following intensive Thai language classes, these children can hopefully be admitted to schools during their temporary stay in Thailand.
- UNHCR has identified vulnerable individuals in Thailand, including unaccompanied minors, for resettlement consideration and has secured departure clearances and authorization for their timely transfer to Bangkok. In the first half of 2014, 25 Rohingya individuals departed for resettlement to the United States.
- In Malaysia, UNHCR addresses the serious medical conditions of persons of concern by referring them to various healthcare providers, depending on the severity of symptoms. Almost all cases are referred for emergency registration, and of 144 cases in the first half of 2014, UNHCR referred 45 per cent to shelters and provided guarantee letters for 25 per cent so that they could be admitted to government hospitals.
- UNHCR has also procured vitamin supplements to immediately and effectively treat persons of concern, largely in Malaysia, who present with symptoms of beriberi.



Providing resettlement counseling to persons of concern.

## In Malaysia

- UNHCR is aware of, and had access to, 230 individuals who arrived by boat in Malaysia in the first half of 2014.

## In Indonesia

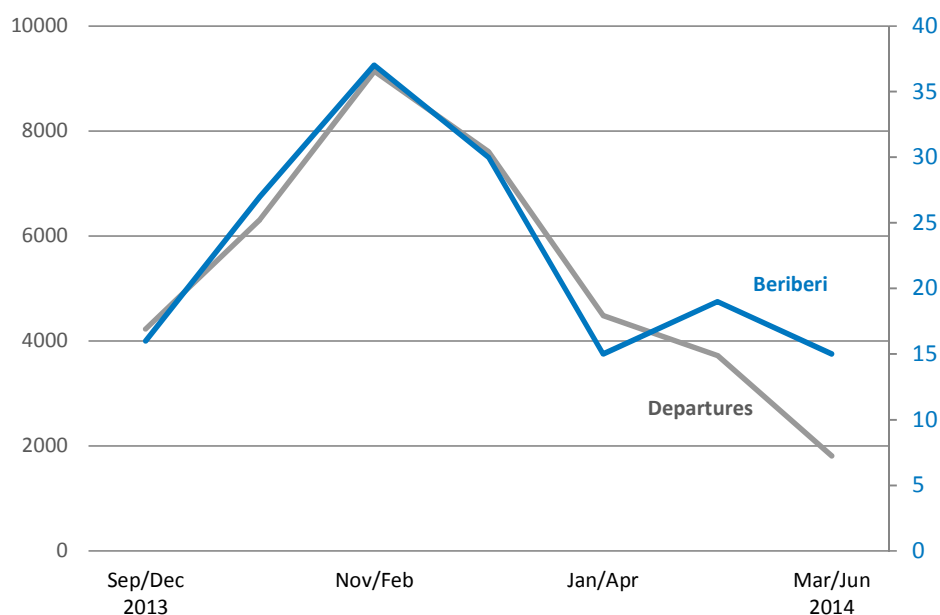
- In the first half of 2014, 60 persons of concern who identified themselves as Rohingya registered with UNHCR (but may have arrived in previous years) in Indonesia, an 88 per cent decrease from the 481 registered in the previous six months, and an 89 per cent decrease from the 565 registered in the first half of 2013. By contrast, the 1,617 asylum-seekers from Afghanistan—the most common country of origin—who registered with UNHCR in Indonesia in the first half of 2014 was nearly identical to the 1,637 Afghans who registered in the first half of 2013.
- As of 30 June 2014, the total number of Rohingya registered with UNHCR in Indonesia was 951, of whom 861 have been recognized as refugees. The vast majority are presumed to have arrived by boat from Malaysia. Of the 60 Rohingya individuals registered in the first half of 2014, 12 had previously been registered with UNHCR in Malaysia.

## ONWARD MOVEMENT

### To Malaysia

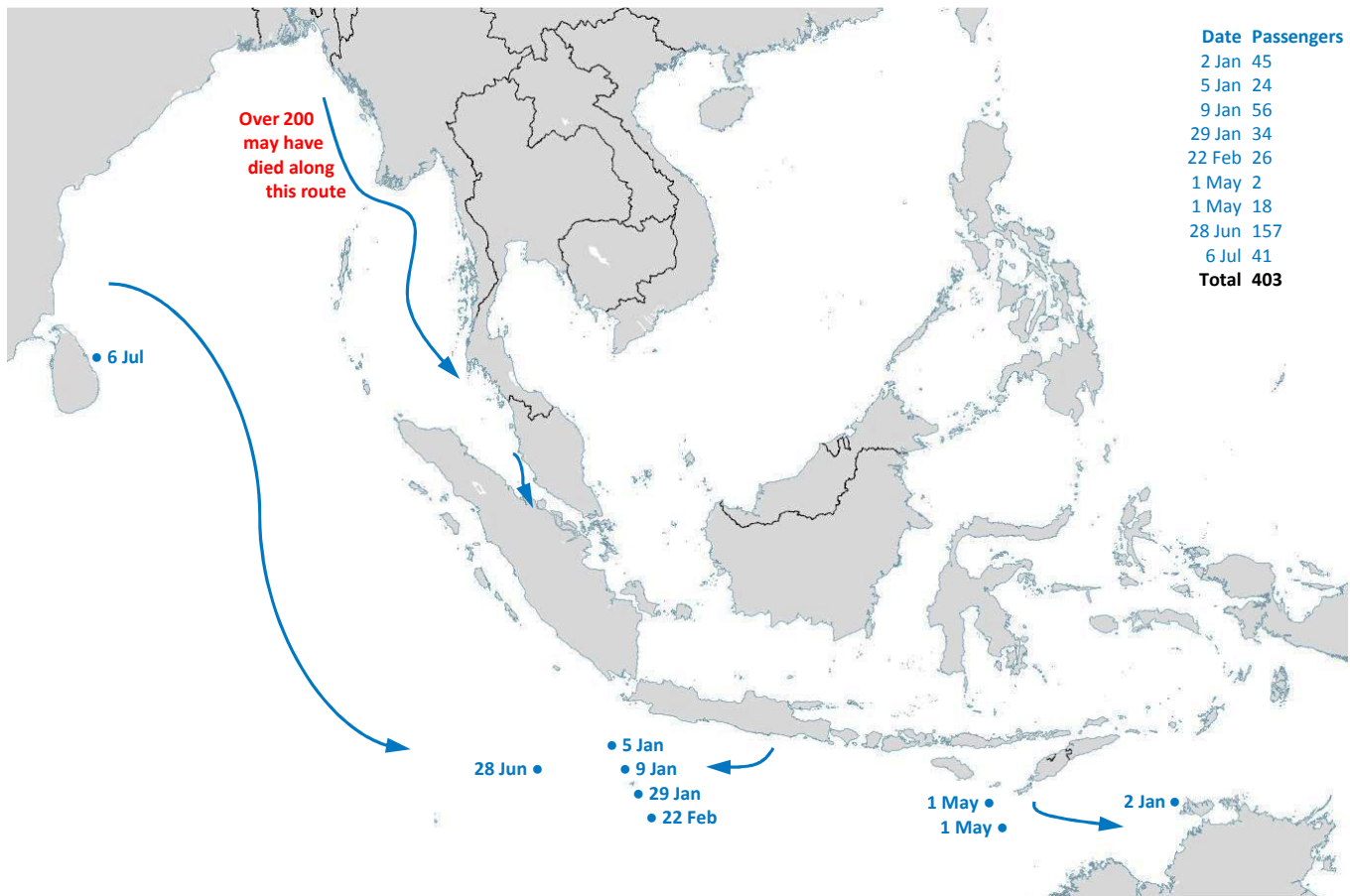
- There are 38,000 persons of concern currently registered in Malaysia who identify themselves as Rohingya, including over 4,000 who registered, but not necessarily arrived, in 2014. Most are presumed to have departed from Bangladesh or Myanmar by sea, disembarked in Thailand, and crossed overland into Malaysia, where they largely reside in the vicinities of Kuala Lumpur and Penang.
- Since late 2013, UNHCR has seen an influx of Rohingya persons of concern in Malaysia with serious medical conditions—apparently developed while at sea and in smugglers’ camps in Thailand, before arriving in Malaysia—who were either referred to UNHCR by government hospitals, relatives, and community members, or dropped off by smugglers or locals at UNHCR premises in Kuala Lumpur.
- Such persons of concern presented with symptoms that included acute polyneuropathy, ascending paralysis, inability to ambulate unassisted, pain, difficulty breathing, and confusion/memory loss. Many were initially misdiagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome, but UNHCR medical personnel later determined, in consultation with physicians who treated the patients in hospital, that these persons of concern were in fact suffering from beriberi, as a result of severe malnutrition and vitamin B<sub>1</sub> deficiency during the course of their journey.

**Maritime Departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border, Sep 2013 – Mar 2014 and Persons of Concern Presenting with Beriberi Symptoms in Malaysia, Dec 2013 – Jun 2014**



- In the first half of 2014, 144 persons of concern to UNHCR in Malaysia presented with symptoms of beriberi, compared to a dozen during the period from August 2012 to November 2013. The influx closely tracked the rise and fall of estimated departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border three months earlier, and reached a peak of 37 new cases in February 2014.
- Two individuals who presented with beriberi symptoms died, while admitted to hospital, within one week of approaching UNHCR. UNHCR has received unconfirmed reports of dozens of additional deaths in Malaysia from persons of concern, community leaders, and health care providers.

## IRREGULAR MARITIME ROUTES AND INTERCEPTIONS



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**Links:**

UNHCR Regional Office for South-East Asia Fact Sheet: <http://www.unhcr.org/519f67fc9.html>