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Rohingya Refugees from Burma Mistreated in Bangladesh

Thailand Also Forcing Asylum Seekers Back into Burma

(New York, March 27, 2007) – Rohingya refugees from Burma living in Bangladesh face an increased risk of mistreatment and are being denied access to necessary humanitarian aid by the Bangladeshi authorities, endangering thousands of civilians and compelling many to seek refuge in nearby countries, Human Rights Watch said today.

“The Bangladeshi government is ignoring its obligations to protect Rohingya refugees and permit international relief agencies to assist with the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “This shameful situation has dragged on for many years and is now causing secondary migration flows to countries as far away as Thailand and Malaysia.”

In early March Bangladeshi authorities destroyed a large part of a refugee settlement called “Tal” which housed over 6,000 Rohingya refugees from Burma at Teknaf, south of Cox’s Bazaar, close to the border with Burma. No alternative shelter was provided for the people being displaced.

Refugees in this makeshift camp had been living in a small piece of land close to a main road with limited access to food, social services and international assistance since October 2004, when Bangladeshi authorities had evicted them from rented homes because they classified them as undocumented people from Burma instead of refugees. Bangladeshi authorities shifted part of the “Tal” camp to extend the nearby highway. Large numbers of homes have been destroyed and there is a critical lack of basic services.

Abuses by Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies are reported to be widespread in and around Rohingya refugee camps, including reports of sexual violence against women. In the two official refugee camps of Nayapara and Kutupalong, people are routinely punished for traveling outside the camp to find food or money and often must resort to selling meager rations to corrupt camp officials or outside merchants. Authorities refuse to permit permanent structures to be built in the camps as a way of encouraging refugees to return home. Children are denied access to education. The provision of health services and access to medicines is also limited by the authorities, as are work and livelihood opportunities inside the camp.

Bangladeshi authorities are also limiting access of Rohingya refugees to international aid. Aid groups such as UNHCR and MSF are only permitted to retain low staff levels and limited programs, and are regularly frustrated by local Bangladeshi authorities from instituting projects that make the camps more established and provide regular services.

“The Bangladeshi government should be helping needy refugees instead of making life difficult for them,” said Adams. “It should work with international humanitarian agencies to create safe spaces and basic services for people fleeing persecution in Burma. This is just basic decency.”

Since October 2006, more than 2,000 Rohingyas from Bangladesh and Burma have arrived in nearly 40 fishing boats in southern Thailand, many reportedly trying to make their way to Malaysia. These

Rohingya refugees and migrants have been shifted by the Thai authorities from Phang Nga and Ranong provinces in southern Thailand to Mae Sot in Tak province, and then forced into Burma, where they are subject to detention and ill-treatment. On March 10, 67 Rohingya men were forced back into Burma by the Thai military to an area controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a pro-Burmese government armed group. Most of the men have since returned to Thailand. On March 23, Thai authorities arrested another 56 Rohingya men around Mae Sot and deported them to the same DKBA area on March 24.

Under the 1951 Refugees Convention, this constitutes “refoulement,” as the men were forcibly returned to a territory from which they had “a well founded fear of persecution” and to which their return would constitute a threat to their lives and freedom.

Some of the deported men have since returned to Thailand. Human Rights Watch has grave concerns for their safety as they are undocumented and without access to basic services from international relief agencies, and subject to arrest by local Thai security officers. Human Rights Watch called on the Thai government to allow UNHCR to access detainees and returned men to determine their status and whether they are eligible for refugee protection in Thailand.

There are currently an estimated 10,000 Rohingya refugees registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia. Thousands more are living as unregistered migrant laborers. Many are abused and exploited by unsavory employers, officials in the Immigration Department, the police and other Malaysian authorities. Much of this migration is facilitated by organized criminal networks and trafficking groups, which further endangers people traveling to other countries.

“The Rohingya have been caught between a hammer and anvil for over a decade in desperate circumstance, with Bangladesh making it difficult for them to seek refuge and Burma continuing to abuse the rights of the Muslim minority in Arakan State,” Adams said. “These abuses have forced thousands of Rohingya to flee to neighboring countries to seek refuge.”

There are an estimated 26,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh living in two desperate and squalid camps at Cox’s Bazaar, called Kutupalong and Nayapara, but there are also an estimated 100,000 unregistered Rohingya living in Bangladesh near the border with Burma.

Over 250,000 Rohingya Muslims from western Burma were forced into Bangladesh by the Burmese military in 1992 in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Arakan State. Since then thousands of people have been detained in crowded refugee camps in Bangladesh and tens of thousands have been repatriated to Burma to face further repression. There are widespread allegations of religious persecution, use of forced labor and denial of citizenship of many Rohingya forced to return to Burma since 1996.

Many have fled again to Bangladesh to seek work or shelter, or flee from Burmese military oppression, and some are forced across the border by Burmese security forces. In the past few months, abuses against Rohingya in Arakan State has continued, including strict registration laws that continue to deny Rohingya citizenship, restrictions on movement, land confiscation and forced evictions to make way for Buddhist Burmese settlements, widespread forced labor in infrastructure projects and closure of some mosques, including nine in North Buthidaung Township of Western Arakan State in the last half of 2006.

Related Material

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