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Many of Myanmar’s Rohingya Still Trying to Flee Precarious Lives

Rohingya Muslims continue to defy strict COVID-19 restrictions on movement to flee western Myanmar’s Rakhine state, many for destinations in Southeast Asia, to flee discrimination and to find jobs, police and other officials said Wednesday.

More than 830,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar for Bangladesh during brutal military-led crackdowns on their communities in 2016 and 2017 in response to deadly attacks by a Rohingya militant group on police outposts. The refugees still live in vast, cramped displacement camps on the Bangladeshi side of the border.

While Myanmar has pressed Bangladesh to send the Rohingya home, the refugees themselves have resisted repatriation without citizenship and safety guarantees, and the more than 600,000 who remain in Myanmar are in a precarious state, with an estimated 125,000 confined to open-air camps in Rakhine state since 2012.

Considered illegal immigrants, the Rohingya face systematic discrimination and are denied access to basic services and jobs.

Authorities detained more than 160 Rohingya in Yangon and Ayeyarwady regions in January alone as they sought to make their way out of the country with the help of traffickers.

Rohingya from Rakhine who do not have proper IDs or travel permits are still attempting to leave their homes amid the COVID-19 crisis, with many falling victim to traffickers after being tricked into believing that they would transport them to Thailand to Malaysia.

The Ayeyarwady region police force said authorities had arrested 307 Rohingya illegally traveling from Rakhine state between 2018 and 2020.

In 2018, more than 100 Rohingya from Rakhine state without proper documentation were arrested in the Yangon region.

Similarly, police arrested more than 150 Rohingya in the Andaman Sea near in the Tanintharyi region in December 2019. Authorities verified that 130 of them were Myanmar residents and sent them back to their homes in Rakhine state.

On Wednesday, authorities arrested 13 more Rohingya traveling in a vehicle that was stopped at a security checkpoint in Ayeyarwady region.

Local police commander Tin Hlaing said authorities have quarantined the detained Rohingya inside Patheingyi University and have been interrogating them, their driver, and his assistant.

“We learned from the interrogations that they were leaving for Malaysia,” Police Lieutenant Colonel Tun Shwe of Ayeyarwady region told RFA.

“We have charged the man who transported them under Section 367 of Myanmar’s Penal Code,” he added. “We are currently searching for more of them.”

Section 367 pertains to kidnapping people with intent to subject them to grievous injury or slavery, and carries a punishment of up to 10 years in prison and a fine.

Sending them back

On Jan. 19, police arrested 34 Rohingya in the Razadaing River in Ayeyarwady region, but the man who transported them fled.

Similarly, seven Rohingya from Rakhine’s capital Sittwe recently were arrested while traveling on a boat in the Andaman Sea near Chaung Thar beach resort in Ayeyarwady region. Authorities returned them to Sittwe, while the five men who were transporting them were charged with kidnapping under Section 367 of the Penal Code.

Nearly 100 Rohingya from Rakhine’s Mrauk-U township were arrested on Jan. 6 in Yangon region, for traveling with official documents while en route to Malaysia. Police arrested the four men who had transported the Rohingya and charged them with kidnapping and buying or disposing of any person as a slave.

Police Colonel Zaw Min Oo from the Yangon region police force said authorities have been sending back the Rohingya to their places of origin after arresting them.

“We are arranging the transportation with immigration authorities to send them back as soon as they have completed their quarantine,” he said, referring to mandatory seclusion periods to ensure they have not contracted the COVID-19 virus.

On Jan. 12, police arrested six Muslims from Rakhine’s Kyauktaw township for traveling without identification documents in Yangon, though they have yet to find the traffickers.

A Rohingya man from Mrauk-U township who requested anonymity for safety reasons told RFA that Muslims are leaving their homes because of a lack of employment opportunities.

“People are leaving to make money because there are no job opportunities here,” he said. “We have to pay the brokers as much as 5.5 million kyats (U.S. \$4,075) to take us to Malaysia. Some brokers ask for 2 million more on the way. Then they leave us stranded.”

The Rohingya man said he was arrested in Magwe region in 2008 as he tried to travel to Malaysia after paying a broker 1.4 million kyats. He was charged for not having proper documentation and sentenced to two years in prison.

Kyaw Hla Aung, a resident of the Thetkal Pyin Rohingya camp in Sittwe said those who live in the displacement camps are now leaving them permanently amid the pandemic because they don’t have proper IDs and they are not allowed to travel for work.

He suggested that the government take action against traffickers while allowing the Rohingya to travel legally.

“The government has pledged to fight human trafficking and drug trafficking,” he said. “They should investigate the victims to learn about the traffickers. They should follow the chain of brokers, traffickers, and transporters and prosecute all of them. These actions will reduce the trafficking activities.”

Charging the traffickers

Myint Kyaing, deputy minister of labor, immigration and population, said Rohingya from Rakhine state must apply for travel permits at local immigration offices to travel within the state but need to go through a number of state and regional offices to legally travel to other places outside Rakhine.

Authorities used to charge Rohingya caught traveling without permits or proof of citizenship prior to April 2020, but since then, they have only been charging the brokers and traffickers who transport them, while sending the Rohingya back to their places of origin, he said.

“We are now sending back the victims who don’t know how the travel permit works,” Myint Kyaing said. “They need to be educated and supervised. We have also stationed authorities along the highway to stop the vehicles and check their passengers. If we find illegal travelers, we ask them to return to their homes and get proper permits for travel.”

Some Rohingya avoid traveling by road and try to leave the country on fishing boats, he added.

RFA asked the U.N.’s refugee agency (UNHCR) via email why Rohingya in the Rakhine displacement camps are leaving in droves though they are receiving U.N. aid, but the agency had not responded as of Wednesday evening.

Aung Myo Min, a rights activist and director of Equality Myanmar in Yangon, said tricking and exploiting people financially are crimes under international law as well as violations of Myanmar’s Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law.

“The government needs to take long-term and short-term actions,” he said. “In the short term, the authorities need to aggressively take down the gangs who engage in trafficking the Rohingya. If they don’t, the trafficking activities will continue.”

“In the long term, the government need to address the root causes of why these people have become stateless and why they want to leave the state by any means available to them,” he said. “Only then, we can prevent them from being trafficked.”

RFA contacted Police Colonel Myo Thu Soe of Myanmar’s Anti-Human Trafficking Police Force for comment, but was referred to Myanmar police force spokesman Colonel Kyaw Thiha, who had not responded by publication time.

Reported by Nay Myo Htun and Soe Thein for RFA’s Myanmar Service. Translated by Ye Kaung Myint Maung. Written in English by Roseanne Gerin.

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