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The Rohingya of Burma: Victims of Persecution and Violence in Burma and a Commodity of Human Smuggling & Trafficking in Southeast Asia

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BACKGROUND

The Rohingya, an ethnic minority in Burma, is one of the most persecuted people in the world, according to United Nations. Their history of Rohingya in western Burma in Rakhine/Arakan state dates back to several centuries that makes them essentially the indigenous people of the region. Despite their indigeneity, the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state faced some of the worst human rights violations in Burma at the hands of former military regime for over half a century. With several decades of persecution of Rohingya people and the recent waves of violence against them have created a new crisis: human smuggling and trafficking. Despite efforts to eradicate women and children-trafficking in the region, these despicable acts of violations are rampant. The United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking listed sexual exploitation, forced labor, hostage taking, and factory work as some of the reasons for Rohingya people are smuggled and trafficked across the sea and the borders. This is emerging as a major regional issue in Southeast Asia involving Burma, Thailand, and Malaysia, and is reportedly the largest exodus of people since the Vietnam people crisis several decades ago.

FROM PERSECUTION TO HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING

The rapid increase in smuggling and trafficking of Rohingya men, women, and children during 2012 and 2013 is primarily due to the dire situation on the ground in Rakhine state where Rohingya people are facing persecution and major human right violations. This has risen to the level of ethnic cleansing and violence by Buddhist mobs and local Burmese authorities, who are backed by predominantly Buddhist Rakhine armed forces. Waves of violence against ethnic Rohingya by Buddhist Rakhine and the Burmese armed forces began in June of 2012, leaving several hundred dead by official counts (thousands according to reports from the ground) and rendering over 140,000 Rohingya people homeless who are currently living under squalid conditions in internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps. The recent banning of Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières) by the Burmese Government and subsequent attacks on the humanitarian aid workers by Buddhist Rakhine mobs have made the situation in Rohingya IDP camps and villages bad to worse. With the absence of the medical and life-sustaining supplies provided by the international NGOs in Rakhine state, a major humanitarian crisis is looming. Additionally, the rapidly approaching tropical monsoon season bringing torrential rain could cause major health crisis due to water borne diseases and lack of sanitation.

The Burmese Rohingya Association of North America

A Signatory of Arakan Rohingya Union



Reports of Rohingya men, women, and children who are falling prey to the hands of the human smugglers and traffickers have been widely reported in the media. Rohingya families in Rakhine state, escaping the violence and persecution, is the primary reason for the Rohingya becoming prey to the human smugglers and traffickers. The sequence of events consist of two phases. The “smuggling” phase starts when the victims are forced to leave their villages in Rakhine state as their homes have been destroyed or they have been forcefully evicted. The high season for smuggling begins at the end of monsoon season each year when the sea returns to relative calmer condition. The shady smuggling groups operate freely in Rohingya IDP camps and villages in doing their lucrative business. During the past two years, Burmese police in Rakhine state have arrested several hundred Rohingya men and women with false accusation of inciting violence and burning down their own homes in their villages. After each incidence of violence or losing homes, the Rohingya victims are on the run as police forces conduct search-and-arrest operations in the villages. These are fertile grounds for smuggling cartels preying on the victims. There have been widespread reports of Burmese local forces at different coastal posts colluding with the smugglers in boarding Rohingya on small rickety boats and transporting them to larger vessels docked far out in the ocean. There are also implications of involvements by local and state officials of the RNDP (Rakhine Nationalities Development Party) and its allied “969” terror group led by radical Buddhist monk Wirathu, in assisting the smuggling cartels in transporting Rohingya out of Rakhine state. The boats sailing to perceived safe haven, particularly Malaysia, are often overloaded with people with inadequate food, water supplies, and fuel. There are reports of food and water running out in the high seas, often only a few days into their journey, resulting in death of elderly and children in most cases. There were also reports of drowning of hundreds of people as the boats capsize in rough weather. The drifting boats often do not reach the destination, and end up at the territorial waters of Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India. At that point, the smuggling phase often enters into the “trafficking” phase, particularly when the boats arrive in Thailand.

The victims often end up in camps run by shadowy groups in remote forests or islands in southern Thailand. The traffickers demand ransom from the victims and release them upon delivery of cash by the victims’ family members, relatives, and friends working in Malaysia. The victims are often picked up by Royal Thai Navy from the Thai territorial waters and they are placed in detention centers indefinitely. There are reports of serious physical and sexual abuse of the victims by Thai police. The reports also allege that Thai officials collaborate with the traffickers by transferring Rohingya held in Thailand to the custody of the trafficking cartel. Thai officials reportedly adopted a secret policy, known as “option two,” to expel Rohingya refugees using the smuggling cartels from Thailand. The United Nations has called for investigation into the reports. Thailand has no refugee law and does not allow Rohingya to register as asylum seekers. Rohingya refugee’s enetring Thailand have been treated as “illegal migrants” and do not receive protection as refugees under international law. The government separates families holding adult male and some male children, including unaccompanied young boys, in immigration detention centers, and separates primarily women and younger children.

In recent months, most Rohingya have escaped from the detention centers and closed shelters, and gone further south in Thailand only to fall prey to human traffickers. Rohingya told journalists that government officials played a role in the escapes by facilitating contacts between the traffickers and the detainees. Children, particularly older boys, were reported to be among those trafficked. Since October 2013, some Rohingya were “voluntarily”

deported after the government gave them authorization forms in Thai language – which most detainees could not read – and no translation assistance was provided. Some Rohingya who agreed to voluntary deportation were not actually returned to Burma but were sold on to traffickers, according to media reports.

According to eyewitness accounts, some Rohingya women and minors were sold to sex traders in Southern Thailand. Several hundred Rohingya refugees are currently held captives by shadowy gangs that have turned southern Thailand into a human-trafficking superhighway. A record 40,000 Rohingya victims have passed through the trafficking camps in 2013, according to Chris Lewa, Director of The Arakan Project, a humanitarian group.

There are also coercion and clandestine hostage taking of Rohingya women and minors, and sex slave issues are rising at an alarming rate locally in various townships in Rakhine state in Burma. Witnesses have reported that Rohingya women, including female minors, were seen in Buddhist Rakhine settlement villages, known as Natala, who are kept as hostage and sex slaves. Some women who had escaped provided the accounts of their ordeal. There are also reports of abduction of Rohingya women from vulnerable households with no male adults remaining in the households (killed or escaped when sought by police), by Burmese armed forces and keeping them as sex slaves in camps. Rapes victims also gave the accounts of gang rapes by Buddhist mobs and armed forces.

FINDING THE SOLUTION

The Burmese Government has not taken any step to addressing the smuggling and trafficking issues originating in Rakhine state. The local officials and armed forces continue to engage in smuggling the victims as well as taking Rohingya women hostage in forced confinement and sex slavery. Additionally, countries in Southeast Asia do not have effective policy and measures to combat the sea and cross-border human smuggling and trafficking. International community must demand the Governments of Burma, Thailand, and Malaysia to aggressively pursue the issue and bring the perpetrators of the crimes to justice, and allow the international team of investigators to the ground in Rakhine state where the smuggling originates. ASEAN member countries must jointly address this regionally widening issue a top priority. Surgical removal of this problem individually from specific locations will not solve the issue. The root cause of exploitation and smuggling Rohingya victims must be thoroughly reviewed, and it can only be resolved through addressing the political and human right violations faced by Rohingya ethnic minority in Rakhine state, Burma. Major responsibility lies on the Government of Burma in providing protection to Rohingya people in Rakhine state.