

## Abducted Rohingya Among Those Stranded on Trafficking Boat

London, UK/Teknaf, Bangladesh - A boat carrying over 100 Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh was stranded off the coast of Indonesia, and those on board had been in desperate need of food and water. Authorities allowed the refugees on the boat to disembark on 24 October. A viral video of a deceased woman on the ship initially brought attention to their situation, and two others are believed to have died as well. BHRN has spoken to more than ten family members of those stranded on the boat and learned that among those being trafficked are individuals who were kidnapped in Bangladesh and sent on the ship as part of an extortion scheme. It is critical that these refugees get help and that authorities and NGOs can identify who among them was trafficked against their will, provide them with appropriate care, and safely return them home.

The trafficking victims' families told BHRN that their relatives left Bangladesh around October 1st and that the boat stalled off the coast of Indonesia, at which time many of the men were transported to another ship that went to Malaysia while the others were left stranded. Some of the information relayed to BHRN was based upon accounts from those men who arrived safely in Malaysia. Reportedly, those stranded on the ship had gone ten days without food.

Among those trafficked were refugees who were forcibly abducted in the camps and placed on the ship by traffickers as part of an extortion scheme, according to the brother of one of the victims. He said that he was told if he did not pay their extortion fee, his sister and niece would be sold to other traffickers inside Malaysia. He told BHRN that he believed many others on the boat were abducted against their will so that the trafficking boat could be filled to capacity and ensure that traffickers could make more money.

He told BHRN, "She went to visit our father [at the market], and when my father went to buy food, she was kidnapped by car. He looked everywhere for her. After [several] days, the abductors called and let our family talk to her." The man was then informed that she would be trafficked and his family would have to pay an extortion price for her release in Malaysia.

Many other refugees stranded on the boat were women and girls going to Malaysia to get married to Rohingya men. In one disturbing case, BHRN was told that a 15-year-old girl was 'sold' to the traffickers in a scheme that let her travel for free and that she would effectively be sold to the highest bidder to become their wife. One man told BHRN that two of his sisters-in-law fled Bangladesh because armed groups were harassing them and attempting to force them into marriage. Other women sought to reunite with husbands who had fled to Malaysia before them. BHRN has observed a noticeable increase in trafficked women and girls from Bangladesh in recent years, almost always connected to marriage schemes that would spare their families from having to pay dowry.

On 19 October, videos emerged of aid and medical attention reaching those on the boat. BHRN was told by several of the family members that the traffickers reassured them that their family members would be transported on large, safe, comfortable boats that were in good condition. Many of the Rohingya were enticed to leave this way because of the assurances they were given.

The brother-in-law of a 30-year-old woman on the boat told BHRN, "They showed my brother a video of a boat. Our family all saw the video of the boat, and it was big. The boat they actually used was different [than the one in the video]."

BHRN's Executive Director, Kyaw Win, said, "The Rohingya have suffered for decades, and nothing has improved for them. It is cruel for the world to allow them to languish in uncertainty and despair. The root causes of the Rohingya fleeing with traffickers need to be addressed. First, conditions in the refugee camps must be improved, and opportunities for employment and education must be made available. Ultimately, the most important solution is a safe return to Burma where they will have full rights, citizenship, and ethnic recognition."

A second boat carrying almost 150 people landed near Medan in North Sumatra, Indonesia, on October 23rd. More trafficking boats are likely to travel in the coming weeks and months.

BHRN pleads with the Government of Indonesia and all relevant NGOs in the region to urgently provide aid, care, and trauma counseling where appropriate for those on the ship. Efforts must be made to identify those who have been kidnapped and trafficked against their will, and they must be returned home to their families. Refugees who sought to escape conditions in the camps, particularly the violence of armed groups, should be given safe refuge. The governments of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia must increase their efforts to address the

trafficking networks in their countries. Bangladesh and NGOs on the ground must work together to improve conditions in the camps to stop the flow of refugees fleeing with traffickers to escape violence, poverty, and lack of opportunity.

### **Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)**

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) is based in London and operates across Burma/Myanmar works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

### **Media Enquiries**

Please contact:

#### **Kyaw Win**

Executive Director

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

E: [kyawwin@bhrn.org.uk](mailto:kyawwin@bhrn.org.uk)

T: +44(0) 740 345 2378

#### **Ye Min**

Editor

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

E: [ye.min@bhrn.org](mailto:ye.min@bhrn.org)

T: +66(0) 994 942 358