DESPERATE JOURNEYS: ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN SEARCH OF PROTECTION

Over 1 million Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar, have fled conflict and persecution in Myanmar in successive waves of displacement. The largest exodus took place in August 2017, when more than 742,000 individuals fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The region now hosts 1.1 million Rohingya refugees with limited opportunities to develop self-reliance. With dwindling humanitarian assistance, many risk their lives, undertaking desperate journeys[1] in search of safety and solutions. For additional information and statistics, please visit the Myanmar Situation Data Portal.

KEY FIGURES | 01 January 2022 – 31 December 2023

7,300 Rohingya refugees attempted the **land** journey

by land

8,200 Rohingya refugees attempted the **sea** journey on **82** boats

by sea

15,500 Rohingya refugees attempted land or sea journey

[1] For the purpose of this document, the simplified term "movement" refers to Rohingya fleeing by land and/or sea directly from Myanmar or travel in an onward movement from a country where they sought refuge and international protection. 'Attempted' movements include intercepted/stopped movements as well as those reaching their intended destinations.

Photo caption: Rohingya refugees disembarking from a boat in Ulee Madon Village, Muara Batu, North Aceh, 16 November 2023.
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DEVELOPMENTS IN 2023

ROHINGYA REFUGEES ATTEMPTING JOURNEYS | 2023

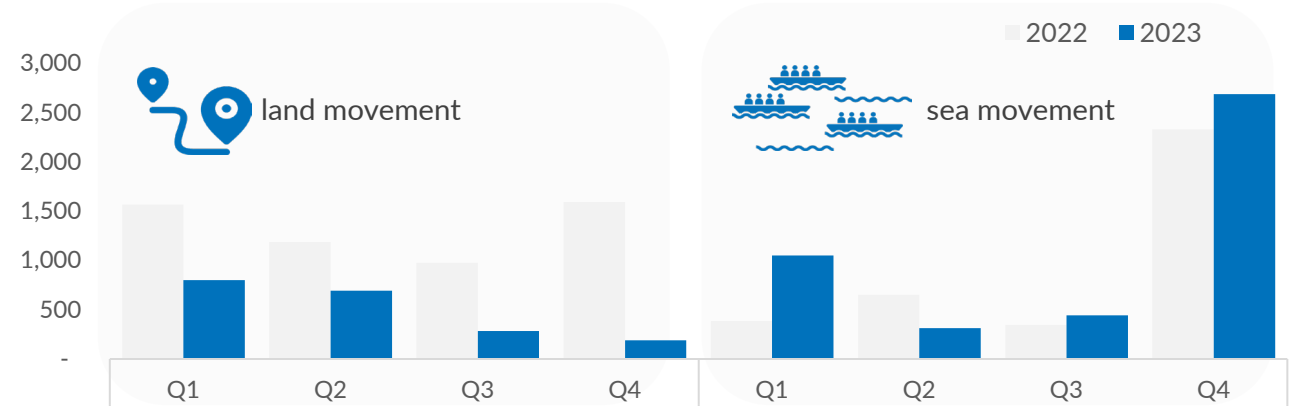
6,500 by land and sea

2,000 by land

4,500 by sea in 41 boats

- A total of 6,500 persons attempted land and sea movements in 2023. With nearly 4,500 Rohingya refugees embarking on perilous sea journeys and 569 people reported deceased or missing, 2023 was the deadliest year on record for maritime movements in the region since the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis. Out of the 6,500 individuals travelling by land and sea, nearly all the 569 persons reported as dead or missing were from maritime movements.
- In addition to sea movements, **around 2,000 Rohingya refugees are known to have undertaken land movements in 2023,** with the vast majority reporting detention by authorities or other protection risks along the land routes.[2] Given the lack of access and information on the often-clandestine land movements, the actual figures are likely to be higher. On the land route, four persons died and 10 were injured in a car accident in Thailand.
- Compared to 2022, the number of persons embarking on **sea journeys increased by 21 per cent while the number of dead or missing rose by 63 per cent.** In contrast, a 170 per cent drop was observed for land movements.
- As observed in the last Quarterly Update, the trend projection of increased perilous maritime movements was confirmed by the end of 2023. Reportedly, additional boats are currently (as of 31 Jan 2024) at sea and with the so called 'sailing season' expected to last until March/April 2024, more boats are foreseen to depart the coming months in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal.
- At least seven **known tragic accidents at sea occurred, resulting in 250 confirmed deaths and 319 persons missing** between January and December 2023. In addition, widespread physical abuse, including Gender-Based Violence, was reported by the survivors.
- **Over 2,400 Rohingya refugees are currently detained in countries along the route outside of Myanmar** on immigration charges, often indefinitely and without due process of the law. Out of these, 72 have serious medical conditions 195 are minors, of whom 126 are unaccompanied or separated children. A significant number of these Rohingya refugee detainees have been incarcerated for prolonged periods that span several years. Within Myanmar, over 1,500 Rohingya were detained from January to December 2023, resulting in an estimated total of **3,900 Rohingya in detention.** With restricted access by UNHCR and partners to detention centres, the actual figure may be significantly higher.

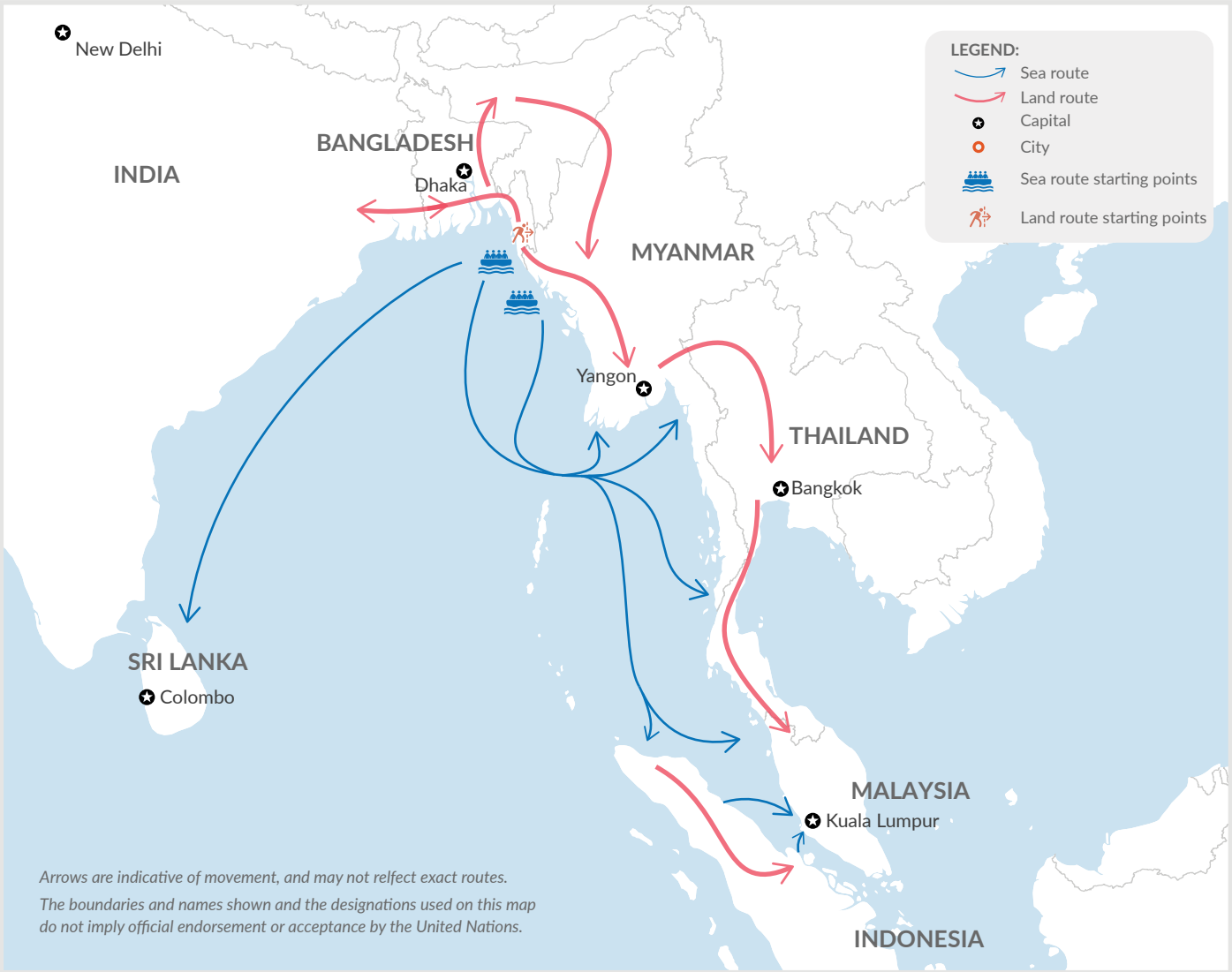
Land and sea movements – quarterly trends



[2] Source: UNHCR

Comparing the last two years' quarterly trends, a steady decrease in land movements was seen for each quarter of 2023, with a particularly marked difference in the last quarter when the number of people moving by land dropped from 1,593 in 2022 to 190 persons in 2023. Although overall land movements are likely to have decreased significantly in 2023 compared to 2022, additional land movements may be identified as individuals approach UNHCR for registration in the coming months. Maritime movements increased from 2022 in three out of four quarters in 2023. UNHCR partners report that two combined key factors could potentially explain these dynamics: I) disruption of the smugglers/traffickers previous modus operandi due to instability along the Thailand and Myanmar border and related increased costs for smuggling over land and II) higher demand and lower charges by smuggling networks for maritime movements.

Land and sea journey routes taken in 2022-2023

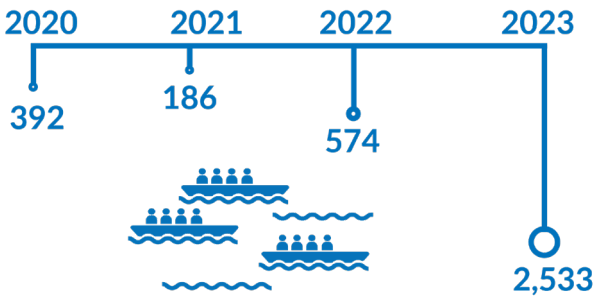


Land and sea movements are often combined in multiple sub-routes, covering various countries, to reach the intended destination. While efforts are made to capture all land and sea movements, it is recognized that many journeys are not known due to their clandestine nature. The information in this report is compiled and triangulated from various sources including governments, partners, UNHCR operations, media reports and interviews with refugees. All data is provisional and subject to change.

INDONESIA IN FOCUS

A significant spike in boat movements to Aceh and North Sumatra was observed in 2023, with a particular rise during the last quarter of the year. From 2021 until end of 2023, new arrivals to Indonesia increased by 1,261 per cent, while a 341 per cent increase was recorded between 2022 and 2023. In 2023, 64 per cent of the boats disembarked in Indonesia (compared to 22 per cent in 2022) while only one boat with 83 persons was registered to have arrived to Malaysia (17 per cent decrease from 2022). While information indicates that this shift might be attributed to new arrangements by the smuggling networks, including different charges for different legs of the journey, further analysis on the causes is needed.

Yearly trends of Rohingya refugees disembarking in Indonesia



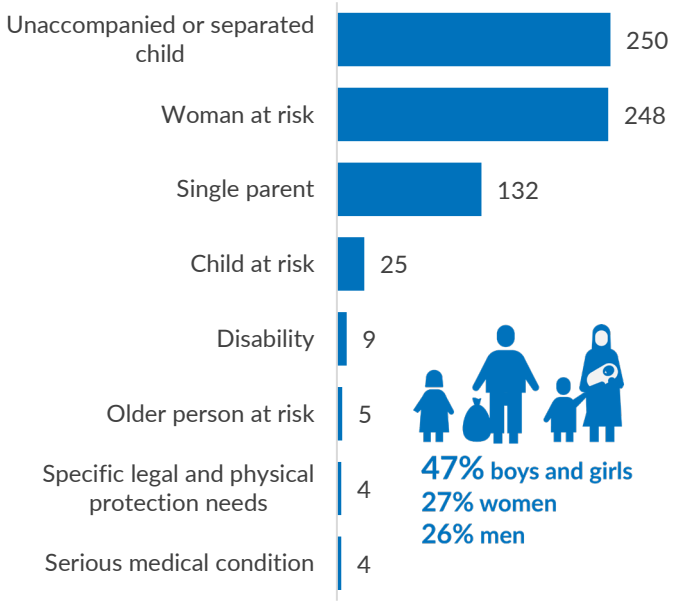
Cases with legal and physical protection needs, serious medical conditions and persons with disabilities were also reported.

The exceptional levels of boat movements to Indonesia have put a significant strain on local reception capabilities, requiring a $5,4 million UNHCR-IOM Emergency Appeal to scale up the response. To date no funding towards the appeal has been confirmed for UNHCR. In support of Indonesian authorities, UNHCR leads and coordinates the inter-agency response at the local, provincial, and national levels. UNHCR, IOM, and humanitarian partners have provided lifesaving humanitarian assistance (shelter, WASH, health, food / CRI, MHPSS) as well as protection (documentation and registration, child protection, GBV prevention and response to survivors). Across the sites, 40 volunteers have been hired by UNHCR to enhance and maintain social cohesion and peaceful coexistence between refugees and the host communities.

A total of twenty boats disembarked in Indonesia in 2023. Out of these, eleven boats carrying 1,750 persons arrived in relatively short intervals between mid-November until end of December. Pending the allocation of new sites, the Rohingya refugees are accommodated in temporary shelters and tents.

Accounts from survivors having disembarked in Indonesia highlight protection risks and various forms of abuse during the journey, including gender-based violence, extorsion, physical abuse, malnutrition, and exploitation. Excluding the known shipwreck, five children and one adult were reported to have died while at sea.

Registration data from new arrivals in Indonesia highlights the vulnerability of the ROH onward movers:



UNHCR and partners continue to work closely with the Indonesian Government to ensure the allocation of new sites that meet basic humanitarian standards while also jointly stepping up efforts to counter the recent misinformation, disinformation and hate speech targeting humanitarian actors and Rohingya refugees. For more detailed information on the current situation in Indonesia, please see: Rohingya Boat Arrivals Emergency Update.

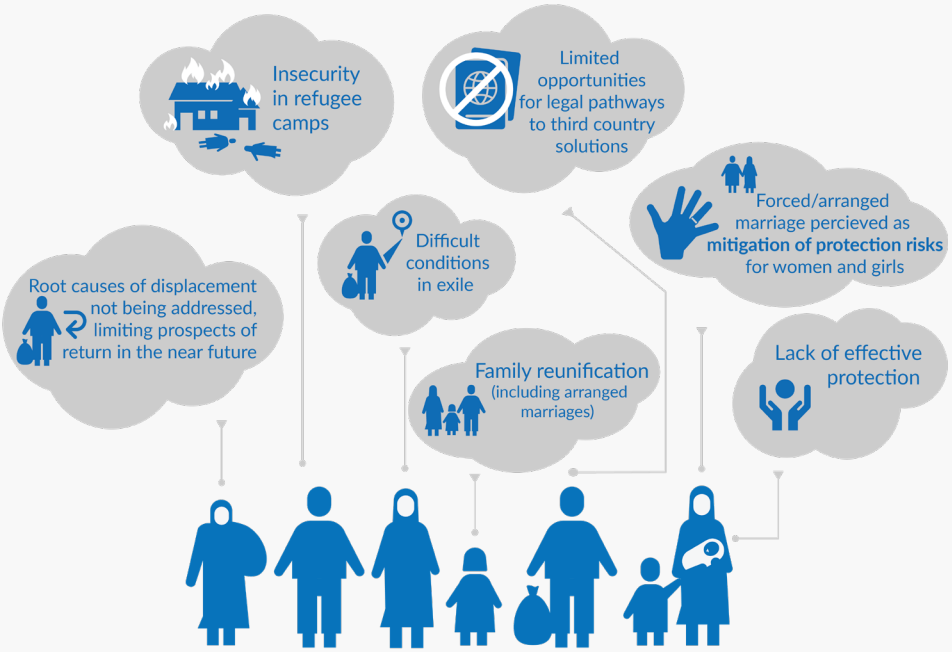
REASONS FOR EMBARKING ON DANGEROUS JOURNEYS

Rohingya refugees are the world's largest stateless population, with the lack of citizenship being a key challenge in accessing basic rights and protection. The majority of Rohingya refugees have indicated they wish to return home to Myanmar once conditions for a voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return are met, including addressing the root causes of their displacement. Pending return, Rohingya refugees hope to contribute to their host communities, despite ongoing limitations on accessing resilience activities, including education, skills development and livelihoods, which often leave them vulnerable to despair and exploitation.

The situation in asylum countries is increasingly protracted and humanitarian funding is dwindling. The 2023 Joint Response Plan was 49 percent funded. The food and nutrition situation in the camps in Bangladesh deteriorated due to funding reductions, with food rations cut from 12 USD in February to 8 USD in June 2023, leading to acute malnutrition for 15 per cent of the refugee population. Starting 1 January 2024, the food voucher value has increased to USD 10 per person.[3]

UNHCR assessments and consultations with Rohingya refugees indicate high awareness of the risks related to movements by land and sea with the intention of reaching other countries in the region. With regards to sea movements, a substantial number (32 per cent in 2023), of such attempts are unsuccessful, with disembarkations taking place in Myanmar or Bangladesh, leaving refugees in an even more vulnerable situation. However, despite the risks, many take the desperate decision to leave in search of protection.

Other factors compelling Rohingya refugees to travel by land and sea



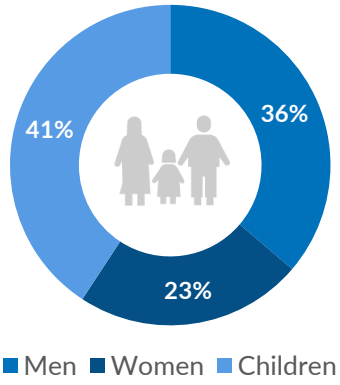
PROFILES - THE INDIVIDUALS BEHIND THE FIGURES

Age and gender dynamics

Prior to 2015, the majority of those undertaking maritime movements were men. However, the gender balance has shifted in recent years as the number of Rohingya refugee women and children on sea routes steadily increased since mid-2015, with peaks in 2020 – 2021 when two-thirds of those embarking on sea journeys were women and children. Though this trend is seen to have shifted slightly in 2022 with 53% women and children, in 2023, the proportion has again increased to 69% with a spike in the last quarter. Analysis of gender dynamics within land movements in 2022 and 2023 reveals similar trends where 66 per cent were women and children (23 per cent and 43 per cent respectively) while 34 per cent were male travelers. Combining land and sea movements, the majority (64 per cent) were women and children while adult men represented 36 per cent of those moving from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

[3] Source: WFP

Gender & age breakdown for land and sea movements | 2022-23



Among Rohingya refugees attempting land and sea movements, **specific profiles face protection risks and challenges:**

Women and girls at risk

Unaccompanied children

Men and boys in search of protection and basic livelihood opportunities

TREATMENT OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES ON THE MOVE

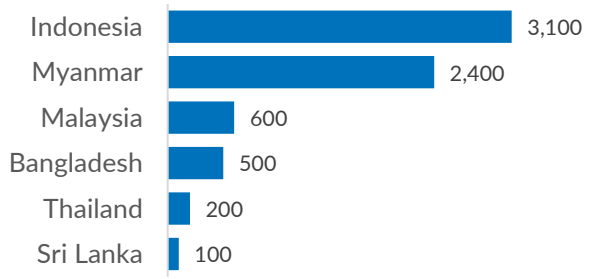
Despite the maritime obligations of all States in the region and the political commitments made by Bali Process member states in the March 2016 Bali Declaration, the lack of a regional mechanism for predictable search and rescue and safe disembarkation has led to varied and ad-hoc responses. While on land routes, Rohingya refugees continue to be at risk of detention and other protection risks.

- **Indonesia has consistently disembarked boats of Rohingya refugees, in line with the Indonesian Presidential Regulation (No. 125 of 2016).** 20 boats with 2,500 Rohingya refugees were disembarked in 2023 in Indonesia and provided with humanitarian support. To the extent possible due to insecurity and lack of humanitarian access, protection-sensitive anti-trafficking screenings were conducted in the designated reception centres. However, due to the high number of new arrivals, finding suitable sites and accommodation remains a challenge, **exacerbated by misinformation, disinformation and hate speech towards Rohingya refugees which has resulted in threats and instances of forced relocations of Rohingya refugees.**
- Within Rakhine State (Myanmar), **1,500 individuals who have attempted journeys by land or boat are known to have been arrested** and charged with violating the 1949 Registration Act or the 1947 Immigration Act. As of 31 December 2023, 1,242 individuals were sentenced while 196 remain under trial. Humanitarian partners provide legal counseling, court representation and in-kind emergency assistance to those in detention and facilitate family reunification and return to places of origin after release.
- Search and Rescue (SAR) and assistance was reportedly provided to a vessel in distress in the vicinity of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to media reports, the vessel was repaired and thereafter set off at sea. Its estimated 142 Rohingya passengers on board remain unaccounted for. **Rescuing individuals in distress at sea without ensuring coordination and cooperation for their disembarkation and delivery to a place of safety is inconsistent with the provisions of the International Convention on SAR**. It can also give rise to concerns regarding compliance with the principle of non-refoulement under customary international law.
- Accounts of Rohingya refugees facing protection risks and various forms of abuse during their journeys have been reported from all countries along the onward route. In Myanmar in 2023, **192 persons were reported as dead or missing due to boats having capsized. 39 women and girls survived gender-based violence (including physical assaults and rapes) during their journey while 6 persons were reportedly abandoned in unknown locations by traffickers.**

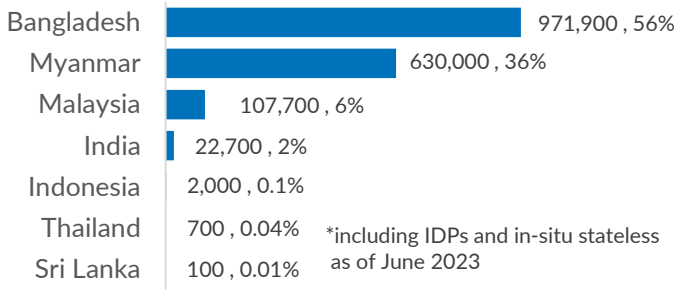
RESPONSIBILITY-SHARING

- Responsibility sharing could be more evenly distributed in a collective effort to save lives along the sea and land routes. This could be achieved through a regional response that encompasses search and rescue, safe disembarkations, protection-sensitive and victim-centered approaches, strengthened efforts to combat trafficking, coupled with local and third country solutions.

Known Rohingya Refugees arriving by sea - Disembarkations per country[4] | January 2022 - December 2023



Rohingya stateless refugees registered with UNHCR & Forcibly Displaced and Stateless in Myanmar* | December 2023



ACCESS TO ASYLUM

UNHCR continues to advocate for access to asylum for refugees and to strengthen protection-sensitive entry systems along sea and land routes. Refugees, including those moving onwards, should in principle be allowed to access territory and must be protected against *refoulement* (return to a country where their life or freedom would be at risk) in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention and international customary law. The principle of *non-refoulement applies to all individuals in need of international protection.*

Rohingya refugees at Mina Raya Camp, Aceh, Indonesia, receive food provision from UNHCR and partners. © UNHCR/ Amanda Jufrian

[3] 'Disembarkations' include dead and missing persons and entails situations where a boat was intercepted in transit by authorities and the passengers arrested. These situations are the majority of disembarkations in Myanmar and also applies to Bangladesh.
[4] including IDPs and in-situ stateless.

KEY PROTECTION ISSUES

Rohingya refugees face significant protection risks before, during and after arriving at their destination.

ARREST & DETENTION

- Over 2,400 Rohingya refugees are currently known to be held in detention outside Myanmar.
- Rohingya refugees are frequently held in prolonged or indefinite detention, with limited access to due process.
- In Myanmar, laws preventing freedom of movement are strictly enforced, leading to 1,500 Rohingyas detained (Jan – Dec 2023).
- While in detention, Rohingya refugee men and boys as well as women and girls face GBV risks.

DURING TRAVEL

- Unseaworthy vessels can lead to shipwreck and death or severe distress situations at sea with a lack of essential supplies, such as food and water. Cases of malnutrition have been identified as well as skin diseases and communicable diseases caught during the journey. During land travel, Rohingya refugees are often deprived of water and food and suffer traffic accidents.
- For both travel modes, refugees are faced with sickness and medical emergencies, and are unable to access medical assistance without risking detention.
- Travelling in dire conditions can lead to refugees being separated from their family members during the journey, thus increasing the risk of re-trafficking.

TRAFFICKING & SMUGGLING

- The interagency Anti-Trafficking Working Group (ATWG) in Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh) identified, referred, and assisted 419 Victims of trafficking from January to December 2023. The ATWG figures should not be interpreted as showing the extent of prevalence of human trafficking in the camps.
- Human trafficking networks frequently operate across borders and are connected to broader transnational criminal syndicates.
- Threats to physical integrity, include abuse, torture and death and are often perpetrated by traffickers or smugglers.
- Rohingya refugees are often denied the use of telephones or other means of communication by smugglers and traffickers and may get separated from their family along the journey.
- Initially, and unaware of the risks, individuals may willingly undertake a journey that later turns into a situation of trafficking.

WOMEN & GIRLS ON THE MOVE

- Gender-based violence (harassment, rape, exploitation, violence, and enslavement) are common risks women and girls face.
- Rohingya refugee women and girls are particularly at risk to be kidnapped and sold into marriage or sexual or domestic servitude.

THEFT, FRAUD & EXTORTION

- Smugglers often take money without rendering the promised service or request a higher fee than initially agreed, threatening to stop the travel or harm refugees or their family members unless they pay more money.
- Smugglers and traffickers are also known to take the belongings of the Rohingya refugees, including phones or personal documents.
- Smugglers and traffickers are known to make false promises, such as of marriage or employment.

UNHCR is grateful for the following donors, who have contributed to our Myanmar situation response as well as those that contribute to UNHCR programmes with globally unearmarked funds and broadly earmarked funds for the Asia-Pacific region:
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