

An Open Boat to Nowhere

Burma's Rohingyas in search of a new life end up behind bars

BY YENI/PHANG NGA, THAILAND

The food ran out 14 days into the voyage. The drinking water was also nearly exhausted. The cheap onboard compass was not reliable, so it was only possible to navigate by the stars. Finally, the engine gave out.

The boat made for the nearest coastline, far from its original destination, Malaysia. It beached in southern Thailand, where the 114 men on board were promptly arrested by Thai police. Their journey to freedom had ended.

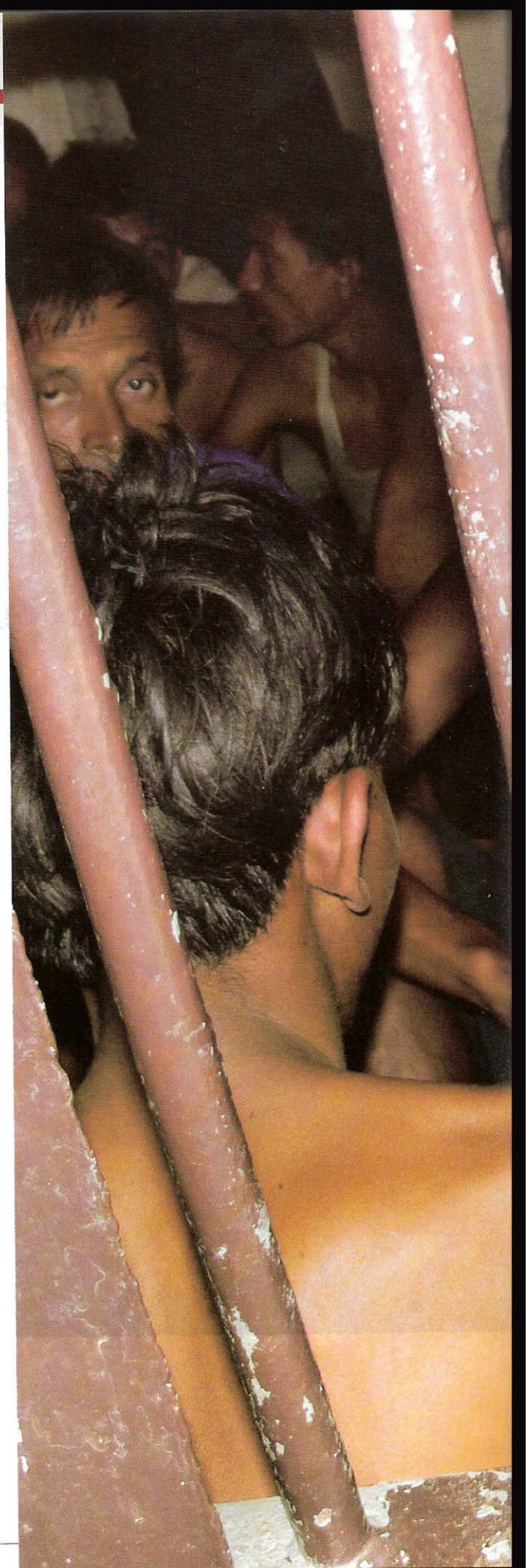




PHOTO: GRASSROOTS HRE

The small, dilapidated boat that brought more than 100 Rohingya refugees across the Andaman Sea

Zar Phaw, one of the 114, told the harrowing story to *The Irrawaddy* from behind the bars of the visitors' section of the local jail in Takuapa, southern Thailand. The 38-year-old Muslim man and his 113 companions had spent more than two weeks in storm-tossed waters of the Andaman Sea in a small open boat.

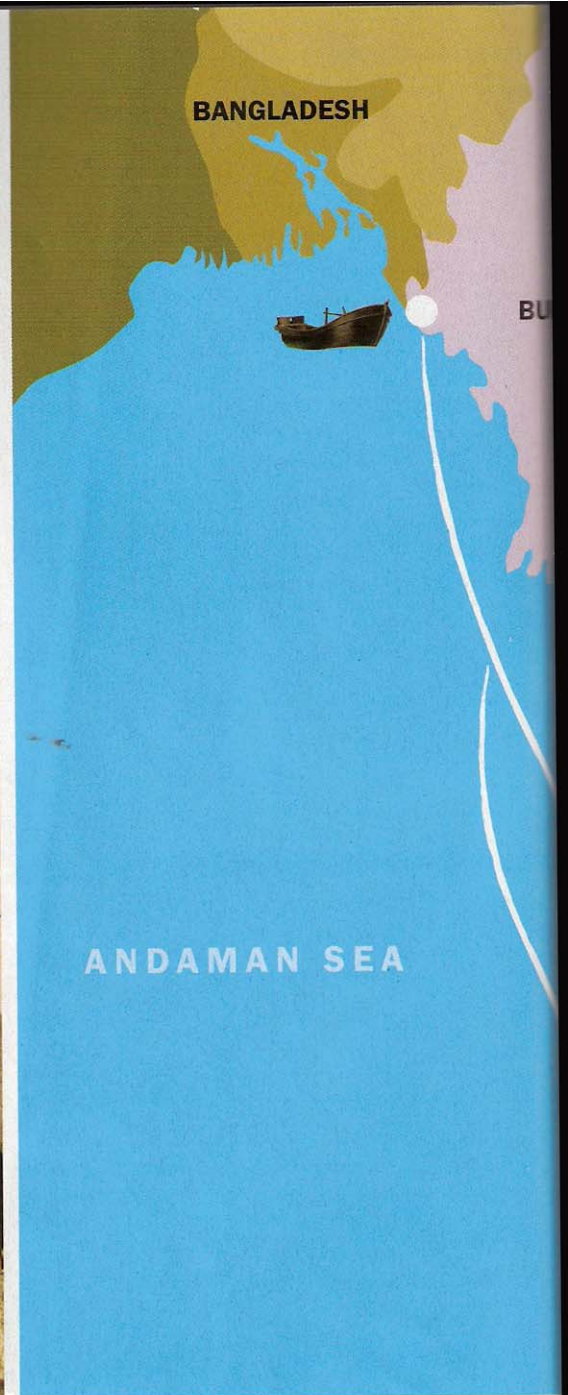
Each had paid between 12,000 and 15,000 kyat (US \$9-11) for the trip. They came from villages along the border between Burma and Bangladesh, homeland of nearly 1 million Muslim Rohingyas, virtually outlawed by the Burmese regime.

The 114 decided to take their fate into their own hands and embarked

on a dangerous journey to find a better life in Malaysia, where about 12,000 Rohingyas live. They weren't alone—other groups of Rohingyas landed along the Thai coast at the end of 2006, and other boats are believed to be still on the way.

"Many people believe we can find a better life in Malaysia," said Zar Phaw. "So I risked all on the boat."

The plight of Burma's Rohingyas has long been one of the worst stains on the country's deplorable human rights record. Officially, the 850,000 Rohingyas living in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, in northern Arakan State, don't even exist. Nationalist





Burma, and also with the involvement of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. But observers say that repatriated refugees and new arrivals have continued to enter Bangladesh.

The flow of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh—and now into the open sea off the Arakan coast—is actually being encouraged by the Burmese regime, according to Chris Lewa, a researcher on Rohingyas and coordinator of the Bangkok-based Arakan Project. She says the regime policy is to make life so difficult for the Rohingyas, even to the extent of restricting their access to food, that they are forced to seek livelihoods

Bangladesh, the Rohingyas look south, to Malaysia, where they hope to find understanding from a Muslim people and government.

Many succeeded in resettling in Malaysia in the early 1990s, but subsequent high-profile Rohingya actions there brought unwelcome attention from the authorities, nervous at any incidents at a time of heightened fears of terrorist activity in Southeast Asia.

In 2002, several Rohingya groups broke into the UNHCR compound in Kuala Lumpur and sought asylum. Two years later, a group of Rohingya asylum seekers set ablaze the Burmese embassy in Kuala Lumpur and attacked the Burmese ambassador.

Despite the two incidents, the Malaysian immigration department pressed on with a program to register Rohingyas in legal employment and allow Rohingya children to attend Malaysian schools, but suspended it last August, claiming corrupt agents and middlemen were making money from the scheme.

The status of Rohingyas arriving in southern Thailand is also precarious. More than 300 arrested by Thai police after landing on southern Thai beaches are being charged with illegal entry and face deportation. A social worker assisting the detained Rohingyas said in December 2006 that several hundred were thought to be on their way

south in as many as 14 boats. Other boat people are reported to have landed unseen and to be in hiding.

Neither Thailand nor Malaysia has signed the two central international agreements on the treatment of refugees—the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees—so a grim future faces the boat people. Many are desperate at the prospect of being deported to Burma and facing not only renewed harassment but imprisonment and worse.

“Kill me here,” declared Zar Phaw, gripping the prison bars. “I don’t want to die at the hands of torturers.” ■

“
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campaigns initiated by the Burmese government, often with the support of local Buddhist communities, have dismissed the Rohingyas as illegal émigrés who infiltrated the country from neighboring Bangladesh and India. As a result, they are subjected to various forms of extortion and arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, forced eviction and destruction of their homes, and even restrictions on marriage.

In 1991, waves of Rohingya refugees fled across Burma’s western border to Bangladesh to escape oppression. Most were repatriated, sometimes forcibly, under an agreement between Bangladesh and

elsewhere.

“The military regime uses food as a weapon, and its strategy has proven effective in compelling Rohingyas to leave Arakan,” Lewa says. “It moves Rohingyas from visible refugees into invisible refugees, labeled economic migrants.”

But the Rohingyas are just as badly off in Bangladesh, where they are forbidden to seek legitimate employment. As illegal migrants, they are exploited by local employers, who pay less than \$1 a day. “Life is so hard there that I could not afford to support my seven children and my wife,” said Zar Phaw.

Unwanted in both Burma and

Learning with the Irrawaddy 18

To accompany February 2007 Issue of Irrawaddy Magazine

Selected article: *An Open Boat to Nowhere*, pages 22-25

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

Title

You are about to read an article called *An Open Boat to Nowhere* .
What do you think an open boat is? What do you think this article will be about?

Activity 2

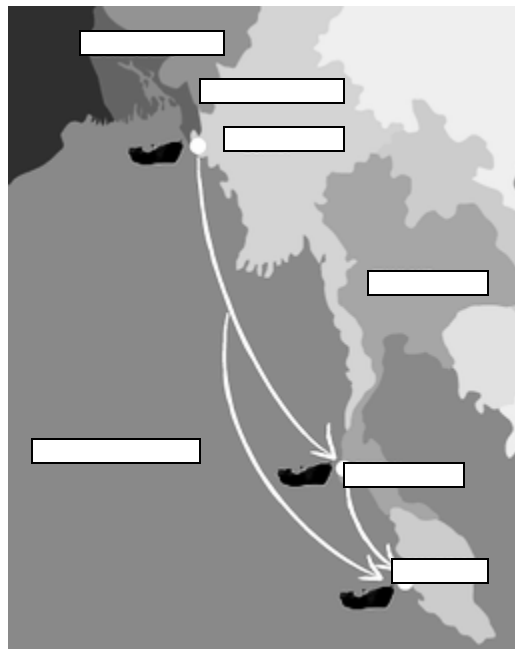
Brainstorm: Rohingyas

What do you know about Rohingya people?
Do you know where in Burma they come from?
Do you know what religion they are?
What else do you know about them?

Activity 3

Label this Map:

Label this map to show where the following places are: Burma, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, the Andaman Sea, Arakan State and Phang Nga.



Activities to do During Reading

Activity 4

Paragraph Summaries

Read these paragraph summaries. Match the summaries with the paragraphs in the article. Write the number of the paragraph it matches next to the letter for the correct summary.

- A** The Burmese governments' record on human rights is very poor, and their treatment of the Rohingyas is particularly bad. The government does not even admit the existence of many Rohingyas, and pretends others are illegal immigrants. Because of this, their personal and property rights are easily attacked.
- B** To escape bad treatment, many Rohingyas entered Bangladesh as refugees sixteen years ago. Although governments and organizations forced them to return, many still try and enter Bangladesh.
- C** Some experts think that the Burmese government are trying to make the Rohingyas to leave by making it impossible for them to make a living or survive in Burma.
- D** Life in Bangladesh is very difficult for Rohingyas. They must work illegally and are not paid enough to keep a family.
- E** Although there were problems, the Malaysian government had started to make it legal for Rohingyas to live there. Last year they stopped the scheme because of corruption.

Activity 5

Comprehension questions

1. How many Rohingyas live in Malaysia?
2. Do Buddhists in Arakan State support the Rohingyas?
3. Were the UNHCR aware of the forced repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh back to Burma?
4. Which organisation does Chris Lewa work for?
5. How does she think the Burmese government is forcing Rohingyas to leave?
6. Why are Rohingyas in Bangladesh paid less money for work than Bangladeshis?
7. When did Rohingya groups carry out direct political action in Malaysia?
8. Why did these actions alarm the Malaysian government so much at the time?
9. Is there currently any other country where Burma's Rohingyas are allowed to stay?

Activity 6**Vocabulary: Match the word with its meaning**

Find these words in the article, then match the words with their meanings.

paragraph 1: navigate

paragraph 2: promptly

paragraph 5: embark

paragraph 7: plight

paragraph 7: initiate

paragraph 7: extortion

paragraph 7: arbitrary

paragraph 8: repatriate

paragraph 9: restrict

paragraph 9: livelihood

paragraph 10: compel

paragraph 11: forbidden

paragraph 13: subsequent

paragraph 13: high-profile

paragraph 14: sought

paragraph 15: middleman

paragraph 16: deportation

A. the taking of money by threats or violence

B. straight away, immediately

C. looked for, tried to find

D. to find the way, especially when traveling by water or air

E. following or coming after

F. the sending away of unwanted foreigners

G. to begin, to start

H. to send someone back to their own country

I. noticed or known by many people

J. a person in business who is between the seller and the buyer

K. by chance and not controlled by rules

L. employment or work which provides needed money or food

M. a difficult or dangerous situation

N. not allowed

O. to get on a ship or boat

P. to do or make by force

Q. to limit, make more difficult

Activity 7**Gap Fill**

Take these words and use them to fill the gaps in the sentences below. If the word is a verb you will have to make sure you have the right tense for the sentence, and if it is a noun you should check if it should be singular or plural.

middlemen promptly restriction deport navigate compel
embark extortion forbidden subsequent arbitrary

- a. Criminal gangs sometimes take money from people and businesses by _____.
- b. _____ don't produce anything themselves, but sell products and services provided by others to customers for a profit.
- c. The passengers had to _____ on the ship an hour before it left.
- d. _____ issues of *The Irrawaddy* will contain new stories and articles.
- e. On a journey, you can use a map to help you _____.
- f. If you break the law while you are in a foreign country you may be _____.
- g. It is _____ to drive a car or a motorbike when you have drunk a lot of alcohol.
- h. If rules are not enforced in the same way for everybody the law is _____.
- i. The person who speaks first _____ a conversation.
- j. Sometimes governments _____ people to join the army.
- k. If you owe money, it is best to pay it _____.

Activity 8**Phrasal verbs**

Look at paragraph 1 and 2: ‘*ran out*’, ‘*gave out*’ and ‘*made for*’. Here, because they are used with another word, the verbs ‘*to run*’, ‘*to give*’ and ‘*to make*’ do not have their usual meanings. What do you think they mean here when they are used together with these words?

If verbs are used together with another word, and together the two words have a different meaning, they are called **phrasal verbs**. Sometimes it can be hard to guess what phrasal verbs mean, so you have to learn the meaning of the two words together.

These are also called multi-word verbs. They are made up from two (or sometimes three) words. One of the words is always a verb, the other words that are used to make multi-word verbs are usually prepositions or adverbs.

Read the following passage and underline the places where you can see phrasal verbs.

Aung Aung liked to look after his old aunt, so he would phone up every Saturday to see if she was all right. One Saturday, his aunt told him that she had run out of water. He picked up some big bottles of water on the way, and drove to her house. Aung Aung watched her turn on the tap, but nothing came out. She told him a repair person had called in earlier and said it would be mended in an hour or two. They remembered that there used to be a well out in the garden, so they went out to look for it. The well was easy to find, but had no water in it. It seemed to have dried up. When they went back to the house, they heard water running. They had forgotten to turn off the tap, and the pump was mended already!

Activities to do after Reading**Activity 9****Discussion**

What could be done to help the Rohingyas?
What do **you** think should be done?
Where do you think they should live?