

Harrowing voyage for Rohingya Muslims

by [Carlos Sardiña Galache](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) Last October, Mohammad Idiris put himself in the hands of human traffickers in Myanmar. His decision followed years of experiencing the ethnic persecution of Rohingya Muslims, and it started a harrowing journey of more than six months that did not bring him to his chosen destination, Malaysia.

Thousands of Rohingya, acting out of desperation in Myanmar and lured by unscrupulous traffickers, are taking dangerous boat journeys that have left many adrift on the open ocean and others, unable to pay ransom, killed in camps. Mass graves have recently been discovered in Thailand and Malaysia.

Idiris said that traffickers lied to him, held him for ransom, and shuffled him between boats. His ordeal on the open seas ended in early May when his crowded ship landed on the coast of Aceh, a province in Indonesia. On May 20, Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to shelter some 7,000 boat people, mostly Rohingya.

Before setting sail from Myanmar, traffickers told Idiris that he could pay for his passage once he found a job in Malaysia. But once he was en route, they moved him three times to different boats and demanded \$2,000 from his family for him to be delivered safely.

“I didn’t know it was going to be like this,” said Idiris, whose family sold land to pay a broker. “If I had known, I would have stayed in Myanmar.”

Idiris said he never considered leaving his hometown of Maungdaw, a district in Rakhine State, until three years ago. Back then, he worked as a fisherman to help provide for his family.

“We were poor but we could eat,” he said at a camp in Aceh with 329 other refugees.

But in 2012, a wave of sectarian violence between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority engulfed Rakhine. At least 140 people were killed, most of them Rohingya, and 140,000 were displaced. Many remain confined to low-quality

camps.

Idiris had not been displaced. But repressive policies enacted by the Buddhist-majority government made it difficult to make a living and added to an overall climate of fear.

“We have a curfew in our village, and I couldn’t get out to work,” he said. “I was too afraid of the Rakhine people and the army, and two people were killed when they went out of our village to fish.”

Now that feeling of desperation has been compounded among Rohingya. Thousands are leaving with promises of reaching distant shores. They are often joined by economic migrants from Bangladesh. Many have lost their lives looking for a safe harbor.

Other migrants have died after exposing themselves to a vast and ruthless transnational network of human trafficking. Reports this month indicate many Rohingya disembarked in southern Thailand or northern Malaysia where they were beaten, starved, and tortured until their families paid a ransom.

In the past month, Thai and Malaysian authorities have discovered several camps with mass graves containing hundreds of bodies. The discovery in Thailand was part of a crackdown on traffickers after unscrupulous boat crews left refugees stranded at sea for weeks.

Idiris appears comparatively fortunate. He spent his first six days at sea in a cramped boat with 300 people. Then traffickers transferred him to a boat with 900 people, he said. Traffickers told him his family needed to pay \$2,000 in ransom. Idris said they sold land, but the traffickers said no money arrived. He was kept on board six months working in the kitchen.

In early May, he suddenly got sent to a different boat with 580 people that the crew soon abandoned.

Two days later, the boat arrived in Aceh, where the local residents have welcomed the refugees. Their future remains uncertain, as nations in the region have yet to establish a comprehensive plan for how to handle the migrant crisis.

While migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh are mostly young men, many Rohingya women and children embark on the boats. Say Nuwara, a 14-year-old girl

from a village near Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, stayed four months at sea with her mother and 13 other relatives. They arrived in Aceh on the same boat as Idiris.

Three of Nuwara's relatives were killed during interreligious riots in 2012. Her family's land was part of a large-scale confiscation by the government to relocate people displaced by the violence. In the process, the family was deprived of its livelihood. They ended up in a camp.

"Life was too difficult in Myanmar," she said. "We decided to go to Malaysia because we have relatives there that can help us."

So far, Aceh has received the refugees with open arms. Fishermen in late May rescued two other migrant-filled boats even though the Indonesian government had previously declared that the navy would push back any ship approaching its coast.

That policy resulted in what one aid agency called "maritime ping-pong with human lives," with boats pushed from country to country.

Acehnese families are visiting the Rohingya in their camp and inviting them to their homes.

"We feel happy here, because these people are treating us as brothers, but we are still worried about our families in Myanmar," Idiris said.

When asked if he wants to go to Malaysia, he said, "I like to be here, but I need to go to a place where I can make a living."

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