

## **Police begin exhuming bodies at jungle camps**

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**By Praveen Menon & Andrew RC Marshall, Reuters**

Malaysian police forensic teams, digging with hoes and shovels, began the grim task today of exhuming the bodies of dozens of suspected victims of human traffickers found buried around jungle camps near the Thai border.

Authorities believe at least two of the camps where they have found nearly 140 graves were abandoned in the last two to three weeks, around the time that Thailand launched a crackdown on people smugglers.

The dense forests of southern Thailand and northern Malaysia have been a major stop-off point for smugglers bringing people to South-East Asia by boat from Myanmar, most of them Rohingya Muslims who say they are fleeing persecution, and Bangladesh.

Today, authorities took a group of journalists to one of the camps, nestled in a gully in thick jungle up a steep, well-worn path about an hour's walk from the nearest road.

Apparently abandoned in haste by the traffickers, what remained of the camp was little more than a tangle of bamboo and tarpaulin, but one police official, who did not want to be identified, said it could have housed up to 400 people.

Malaysian authorities said yesterday they had found 139 graves, some containing more than one body, around 28 camps scattered along a 50km stretch of the border in the northern state of Perlis.

The grisly discoveries in Malaysia followed the uncovering of shallow graves on the Thai side of the border at the beginning of May, which helped trigger a regional crisis. The find led to a crackdown on the camps by Thai authorities, after which traffickers abandoned thousands of migrants in overloaded boats in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

State news agency Bernama quoted Malaysia's police chief, inspector-general of police Khalid Abu Bakar, as saying that the camps were thought to have been occupied since 2013, and two were "only abandoned between two and three weeks ago".

Khalid told reporters yesterday that police had been "shocked by the cruelty" of the fenced camps, where he said there were signs of torture.

### **Body bags**

A large plastic water tank could be seen at the camp visited by Reuters reporters today, suggesting a degree of permanence. A call to Muslim prayers could be heard drifting from a nearby settlement.

An official said 37 graves had been found at the site, a few hundred metres from the Thai border. As the police teams began to dig, a large supply of body bags and white cotton shrouds was piled on the ground.

Thousands of Rohingya Muslims are ferried by traffickers through southern Thailand each year, and in recent years it has been common for them to be held in remote camps along the border with Malaysia until a ransom is paid for their freedom.

Past Reuters investigations have shown ransom demands ranging from US\$1,200 to US\$1,800, a fortune for impoverished migrants used to living on a dollar or two a day.

Yesterday evening, police had removed a badly decomposed body found unburied in a shack at one of the camps. Police said the unidentified person had been dead around two or three weeks.

“The victim could have died and the syndicate did not have time to bury the body as they were rushing to leave the camp,” Bernama quoted local district police chief Rizani Che Ismail as saying.

One of the grave sites was just 100 metres or so from the site where twenty-six bodies were exhumed in Thailand’s Songkhla province in early May, national police chief Khalid said yesterday.

“We don’t know if there is a link between the Thai camps and Malaysia camps,” Phuttichart Ekachan, deputy chief of Thailand’s Provincial Police Region 9, told Reuters.

“It is possible that because of the Thai crackdown some of the camps moved and some of them (migrants) then walked over or escaped to the Thai side. It is possible but it isn’t something we have been able to confirm.”

Residents in the town of Wang Kelian, on the Malaysian side of the border, said they were used to seeing migrants in the area.

“They are often starving, not eaten for weeks,” said Abdul Rahman Mahmud, a resident who runs a small hostel. “They eat seeds or leaves or whatever they can find. It’s a real pity and it’s sad to see this.”

- Reuters