

## **Rohingya man speaks of threats and murders**

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**By M Krishnamoorthy**

Apart from persecution by the authorities, some Rohingya people in the Rakhine state of Myanmar were uprooted from their homeland due to pressure from human traffickers.

Mohd Zakaria, 40, told Denmark's DR TV in a recent interview that human traffickers, who are Myanmar nationals, would threaten to kill his family unless they agree to be trafficked.

"Human traffickers threatened to shoot me and my family. They also threatened to burn our property if we don't get on the boat.

"We were frightened and feared death. We were on a boat for three weeks. We went hungry. Some went ill. We didn't know where we were going," he said.

Mohd Zakaria was also forced to pay human traffickers the equivalent of RM25,000 for the perilous journey. The sum covered the travels of Mohd Zakaria, his wife and four children.

The human traffickers, who Mohd Zakaria described as gangsters, also forced his family to leave all their possessions behind.

"They threatened us daily. If I don't leave, my family and I will be shot," he said.

### **Held for ransom**

Mohd Zakaria and his family were brought out of Myanmar through the port town of Sittwe, the capital of the Rakhine state.

After spending weeks at sea, he and his family landed somewhere in Thailand's Ranong province, where they were forced to make a trip to the Thai-Malaysian border on foot.

During this period, Mohd Zakaria saw fellow Rohingya people being beaten and killed, if they could not afford paying traffickers more money to be smuggled into Malaysia.

"We were forced to pay another (equivalent of) RM8,000 to be brought to Malaysia," he said.

Malaysian authorities have uncovered mass graves in Wang Kelian, Perlis which were likely used by human traffickers to bury dead Rohingya folk.

Once in Padang Besar, Mohd Zakaria and his family were on their own.

Mohd Zakaria and his family now lives in a low-cost linked-house in Ampang. They share the rented home with three other families.

They make a living collecting scrap for recycling and perform odd jobs since arriving two months ago.

### **A long-standing issue**

Mohd Zakaria has written to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in order to seek an appointment to arrange his papers that would certify him as a refugee.

At the time of writing, the UNHCR has not gotten back to him.

His letter details persecution by the Myanmar authorities, para-military groups and "extremist Rakhines".

"Persecution includes burning our houses, destroying villages, raping women, confiscating properties, restriction of movement, extortion and clandestine killings," he said.

Sadly, Mohd Zakaria's extraordinary and cruel story is not new.

According to Amnesty International (Malaysia) board member Joseph Paul, the "selling and trafficking" of Myanmar nationals along the border is not new.

He said the matter was once extensively covered in a NTV7 documentary titled Refugee for Sale.

"That was more than seven years ago. The report implicated Malaysian immigration officials as part of a network involved in human trafficking."

### **More boat people**

However, most Malaysians, Thais and Indonesians were only recently made aware of this human smuggling ring after thousands of Rohingya boat people landed in Malaysian and Indonesian soil.

Human smugglers were unable to complete the Myanmar-Thai portion of the journey due to a crackdown by Thai authorities.

A number of boats were set adrift by the human traffickers. One landed in Langkawi on May 11 and another in Aceh on May 16.

Malaysian, Indonesian and Thai authorities responded by towing the boats out to international waters, triggering international outcry.

Following this, on May 20, Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to allow 7,000 boat people to land on their shores temporarily.

Despite efforts from the authorities, none of these boats have been found.

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