

Precarious limbo awaits Rohingya who make it to Malaysia
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Malaysia is a beacon for ethnic Rohingya fleeing oppression and violence in Myanmar, but countless migrants like Mohammed Ismail are still searching for the promised land years after arriving.

Ismail is among tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have risked their lives over the years to reach Malaysia, only to find a stateless limbo and a new kind of marginalisation.

"Every day, I regret coming to Malaysia but I had no choice," said Ismail, 40, who fled his home in Myanmar in 1992 to escape being forced by authorities into a labour camp.

Scraping by in Malaysia on low-paying construction jobs, he has been arrested twice as an undocumented migrant, deported once, and repeatedly shaken down by corrupt police officers – all common Rohingya complaints.

The plight of the Rohingya has drawn international attention following the boat people crisis that erupted last month, in which thousands of impoverished Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants struggled desperately to reach Southeast Asian countries.

Malaysia and Indonesia agreed to accept them pending possible repatriation or resettlement to third countries as refugees.

But Rohingya asylum-seekers and labour activists say most will likely face the same limbo endured by Ismail.

Rohingya flock to Malaysia because it is Muslim-majority and has a thriving economy with jobs in construction, agriculture and manufacturing that require little skill.

But legal protections are few for the 45,000 Rohingya registered as refugees with the UN in Malaysia, and particularly for the estimated tens of thousands who lack such status.

"There have been so many occasions when police will wait for us outside the construction sites and when we step out to buy food, they will stop and demand bribes from us," said Ismail.

Once, after being paid his monthly salary of \$136, corrupt police officers seized it all, he said.

After his first arrest in 2001, Ismail said police put him on a rickety boat with other Rohingya and Bangladeshis and sent it to Thailand, where human smugglers charged them \$543 per head to take them back to Malaysia.

Waiting for years

Malaysia has never signed the UN's Refugee Convention and is thus not obliged to provide any social services to Ismail, his wife and baby daughter, such as schooling or health care.

Most Rohingya pin their hopes on gaining the coveted UN refugee card, which affords a glimmer of protection from authorities.

But that can take years, followed by many more before resettlement to the United States, Australia or elsewhere can be gained – if ever.

Ismail landed a refugee card in 2004, but a seven-year-old application for resettlement overseas has gone nowhere.

"My wife and I at least we know we won't get killed in Malaysia and we are thankful for that. But my daughter will not get a proper education here," he said.

The UN calls the Rohingya one of the most persecuted groups in the world.

Rohingya complain of systematic mistreatment by Myanmar's Buddhist-majority government, which refuses to even recognise them as citizens. Many have been killed in sectarian clashes with Buddhists in recent years.

Despite this, Richard Towle, the UN refugee agency's representative in Malaysia, said "historically the Rohingya have not been settled out of Malaysia in high numbers".

But Aegile Fernandez of Malaysian migrant-rights group Tenaganita blamed Western "Islamophobia".

"With rising Islamophobia, most countries are closing their doors to Muslim refugees," she said.

There are, however, fresh hopes that growing awareness of the Rohingya plight could open doors overseas.

President Barack Obama has been outspoken on Rohingya rights, raising suggestions of increasing US acceptance.

The US State Department said that over the past five years America had resettled more than 2,600 Rohingya refugees, including more than 1,000 in the past eight months.

It projected that up to 1,600 will be resettled this year and up to 2,500 next year, the vast majority from Malaysia.

The UN refugee agency's Malaysia office said it does not publicly release breakdowns of resettlement numbers to various countries.

But Towle said the difficulties in resettling large numbers means alternatives need to be explored including improving the status of Rohingya already in Malaysia to better their lives and prevent abuses.

"In this day and age, you will not resettle yourself out of a refugee problem," he said.

"If they are going to be here anyway, it's better to regularise their status."

Malaysia, however, has long resisted moves that may draw a new wave of migrants.

That leaves Ismail fearing for his daughter's future.

"She will have no future here. She will end up like me," he said.– AFP, June 3, 2015.

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