

Staff reporter

In the last 12 months ending in June 2014, UNHCR estimated that some 53,000 people departed irregularly through sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in the Bay of Bengal, a 61 percent rise from the previous 12 months.

As in previous years, departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border peaked during the traditional sailing season from October to January. Since June 2012, over half of all estimated departures took place between the months of October and January.

The recent UNHCR report, titled 'South-East Asia: Irregular Maritime Movements, January-June-2014' said irregular maritime departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border set out most frequently from Teknaf, Bangladesh, and from Maungdaw, Myanmar.

Away from the border area, an estimated 7,500 additional departures have originated from the Sittwe area in Myanmar since June 2012.

The UNHCR report estimated that 20,000 people risked their lives in sea crossings in the first half of this year. Many were Rohingyas who fled Myanmar and arrived in the region suffering the effects of malnutrition and abuse during the journey.

Several hundred people were also intercepted on boats heading towards Australia. In the first half of 2014, Bangladeshi authorities reportedly arrested over 700 people, including smugglers and crew, attempting to depart irregularly by sea from Bangladesh.

The report produced by UNHCR's Bangkok-based Maritime Movements Monitoring Unit, also showed that more than 7,000 asylum-seekers and refugees who have traveled by sea are at present held in detention facilities in the region, including over 5,000 in Australia or its offshore processing centers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

Virtually, all maritime arrivals in Thailand had intended to travel to Malaysia, where many had family members. Most were either referred to smugglers by family and friends or recruited from their villages by smugglers.

Individuals departing from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border paid between USD 50-300 to board departure vessels.

Small boats ferried groups of 5-30 passengers to larger fishing or cargo vessels with capacities typically ranging from 100-700 passengers.

Irregular maritime movements of mixed populations that include persons of concern to UNHCR have been prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region for many years, but movements through South-East Asia, largely originating from the Bay of Bengal, have increased at a particularly rapid rate following inter-communal violence in Myanmar in June 2012.

Since then, some 87,000 people are estimated to have departed by sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area.

This trend has continued through the first half of 2014, during which the main route of irregular maritime movement in South-East Asia remained the journey through the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime border to the Malaysia-Thailand maritime border.

Other irregular maritime movements passing through South-East Asia followed routes through the Indian Ocean from South Asia and Indonesia to Australia, and across the Strait of Malacca from Malaysia to Indonesia.

Although the precise number of people traveling on such routes is unknown and likely much greater than what has been reported, UNHCR is aware of over 20,000 irregular maritime

departures from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area in the first half of 2014, in addition to hundreds who have attempted the boat journey to Australia.

Given the high proportion and total number of persons of concern to UNHCR departing by sea from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, as well as a lack of access to those who traveled along other routes, this report largely focuses on the journey between the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and the Malaysia-Thailand border.

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