

Yangon, Oct 25 (AP) - A growing sense of desperation is fueling a mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims from western Myanmar, with the number fleeing by boat since communal violence broke out two years ago now topping 100,000, a leading expert said Saturday.

Chris Lewa, director of the nonprofit advocacy group Arakan Project, said there has been a huge surge since Oct. 15, with an average of 900 people per day piling into cargo ships parked off Rakhine state.

That's nearly 10,000 in less than two weeks, one of the biggest upticks yet.

Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist nation of 50 million that only recently emerged from half a century of military rule, has an estimated 1.3 million Rohingya. Though many of their families arrived from neighboring Bangladesh generations ago, almost all have been denied citizenship. In the last two years, attacks by Buddhist mobs have left hundreds dead and 140,000 trapped in camps, where they live without access to adequate health care, education or jobs.

Lewa said some Rohingya families have been told new ships have started arriving in neighboring Thailand, where passengers often are brought to jungle camps, facing extortion and beatings until relatives come up with enough money to win their release.

From there they usually travel to Malaysia or other countries, but, still stateless, their futures remain bleak.

In Myanmar, the vast majority live in the northern tip of Rakhine state, where an aggressive campaign by authorities in recent months to register family members and officially categorize them as "Bengalis" - implying they are illegal migrants from neighboring Bangladesh - has aggravated their situation.

According to villagers contacted by The Associated Press, some were confined to their villages for weeks at a time for refusing to take part in the "verification" process, while others were beaten or arrested.

More recently, dozens of men were detained for having alleged ties to the militant Rohingya Solidarity Organization, or RSO, said Khin Maung Win, a resident from Maungdaw township, adding that several reportedly were beaten or tortured during their arrests or while in detention. Lewa said three of the men died.

"Our team is becoming more and more convinced that this campaign of arbitrary arrests is aimed at triggering departures," she said.

Rakhine state spokesman Win Myaing denied any knowledge of arrests or abuse.

"There's nothing happening up there," he said. "There are no arrests of suspects of RSO. I haven't heard anything like that."

Every year, the festival of Eid al-Adha, which was celebrated by Muslims worldwide early this month, marks the beginning of a large exodus of Rohingya, in part due to calmer seas but also because it is a chance to spend time with family and friends.

But there seems to be a growing sense of desperation this year, with numbers nearly double from the same period in 2013.

Lewa said a number of Rohingya also were moving overland to Bangladesh and on to India and Nepal.

The United Nations, which has labeled the Rohingya one of the most persecuted religious minorities in the world, earlier this year confirmed figures provided by Lewa about a massive exodus that began after communal violence broke out in June 2012, targeting mainly Rohingya. With the latest departures, Lewa estimates the number of fleeing Rohingya to be more than

100,000.

It was not immediately clear where the newest arrivals were landing.