Protection at Sea in South-East Asia – 2022 in Review

In the last two months of 2022, four boats carrying over 450 Rohingya disembarked in Aceh. One boat of over 100 Rohingya disembarked in Sri Lanka. One boat is believed to have sunk in early December with approximately 180 individuals on board. Several boats that departed in December remained at sea as of the end of the year.

Those intercepted in Myanmar have been arrested and sentenced for violating the 1949 Registration Act or the 1947 Immigration Act, resulting in two- or five-years imprisonment respectively. Upon rescue in other locations, authorities, the local community, and humanitarian actors mobilize to address the medical and other needs of the rescued persons. In addition, UNHCR registers new arrivals and, with protection partners, identifies survivors with specific needs and provides specialized services. Vulnerable individuals include potential victims of trafficking, unaccompanied and separated children, and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Disembarked Rohingya report encounters with naval authorities while at sea. However, even when in distress, these encounters often result in pushbacks intended to prevent disembarkation. Notably, in 2022, the Sri Lankan navy engaged to ensure rescue and disembarkation of a boat and other boats carrying Rohingya disembarked in Aceh, where support was coordinated with the Indonesian authorities. This important humanitarian responsibility must be more evenly distributed among countries in the region to ensure protection responses are sustainable.

Methodology: Maritime movements are by nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. The information in this report is compiled and triangulated from various sources including governments, partners, media reports and interviews with refugees. All data is provisional and subject to change. 2022 boat movements of individuals other than Rohingya, including Sri Lankans, are not included in this report.
Maritime Movements of Rohingya Refugees in South-East Asia

Flash Update
2022 in Review

RECOMMENDATIONS
A comprehensive regional response to maritime movements remains essential to address threats to life at sea and to ensure more equitable and predictable responsibility-sharing.

Necessary actions include:
1) Prompt search and rescue operations.
2) Timely disembarkation in a place of safety.
3) Support to countries of disembarkation in the humanitarian response.
4) Effective prosecution of smugglers and traffickers.
5) Enhanced protection and opportunities in and from countries of asylum, including by expanding safe legal pathways to third countries.
6) Support to efforts to address the root causes of displacement in Myanmar. Until these are resolved, refugees will continue to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety.

The current crisis in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea is a crisis of solidarity. Without a regional response, States will continue adopting unilateral policies that endanger lives. ASEAN and the Bali Process have a responsibility to foster an equitable and life-saving mechanism to prevent and respond to boat movements.