



DESPERATE JOURNEYS: ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN SEARCH OF PROTECTION

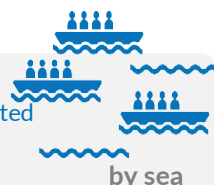
Over 1 million Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar, have fled conflict and persecution in Myanmar in successive waves of displacement. The largest exodus took place in August 2017, when more than 742,000 individuals fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The region now hosts 1.1 million Rohingya refugees with limited opportunities to develop self-reliance. With dwindling humanitarian assistance, many risk their lives, undertaking desperate journeys¹ in search of safety and solutions. For additional information and statistics, please visit the [Myanmar Situation Data Portal](#).

KEY FIGURES | 01 January 2022 – 31 August 2023



5,100 Rohingya refugees attempted the land journey

5,600 Rohingya refugees attempted the sea journey on 62 boats



10,700 Rohingya refugees attempted land or sea journey

DEVELOPMENTS IN 2023

- With more than 3,700 Rohingya refugees embarking on perilous sea journeys and 350 people reported deceased or missing, 2022 was one of the deadliest years on record for maritime movements in the region since the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis. Out of the 3,400 individuals travelling by land and sea from January to August 2023, a total of 207 people were reported as dead or missing. Comparing January – August 2023 with the same period in 2022, **the number of persons embarking on sea journeys has increased by 56 per cent while the number of dead or missing rose by 192 per cent.**

ROHINGYA REFUGEES ATTEMPTING JOURNEYS | 2023

3,400 by land and sea

1,500 by land

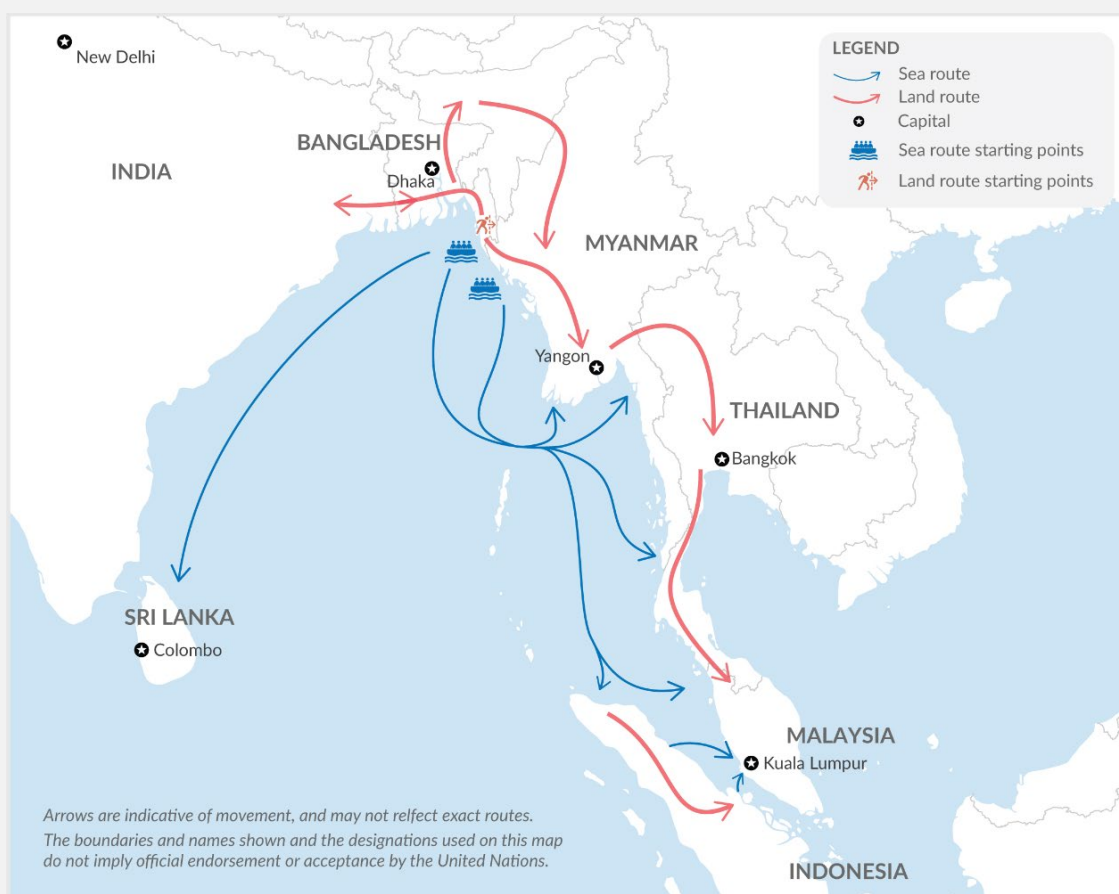
1,900 by sea in 21 boats

¹ For the purpose of this document, the simplified term “movement” refers to Rohingya fleeing by land and/or sea directly from Myanmar or travel in an onward movement from a country where they sought refuge and international protection. ‘Attempted’ movements include intercepted/stopped movements as well as those reaching their intended destinations.

Photo caption: Rohingya refugees in Camp 11 of Kutupalong walk through debris after a blaze destroyed more than 3,000 shelters. ©UNHCR/Sahat Zia Hero

- With the cyclone season coming to an end in September, most boats are projected to depart during the following 7-month (October – April) period of relatively calm waters. As such, the observed trend of significantly increased movements for 2023 is worrisome, indicating yet another year of record high perilous maritime movements in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal.
- At least **three known serious shipwrecks occurred, resulting in 30 confirmed deaths and 177 persons missing** between January and August 2023.
- In addition to maritime movements, **around 1,500² Rohingya refugees are known to have undertaken land movements so far in 2023**, with the vast majority reporting detention by authorities or other protection risks along the land routes. Given the lack of access and information on the often clandestine land movements, the actual figures are likely to be higher.
- **Over 2,200 Rohingya refugees are currently detained in countries along the route outside of Myanmar** on immigration charges, often indefinitely and without due process of the law. Out of these, 254 are minors, of whom 140 are unaccompanied or separated children and 58 have serious medical conditions. A significant number of these Rohingya refugee detainees have been incarcerated for prolonged periods that span several years. Within Myanmar, over 1,200 Rohingya were detained from January to August 2023, resulting in an estimated total of **3,400 Rohingya in detention**. With restricted access by UNHCR and partners to detention centres, the actual figure may be significantly higher.

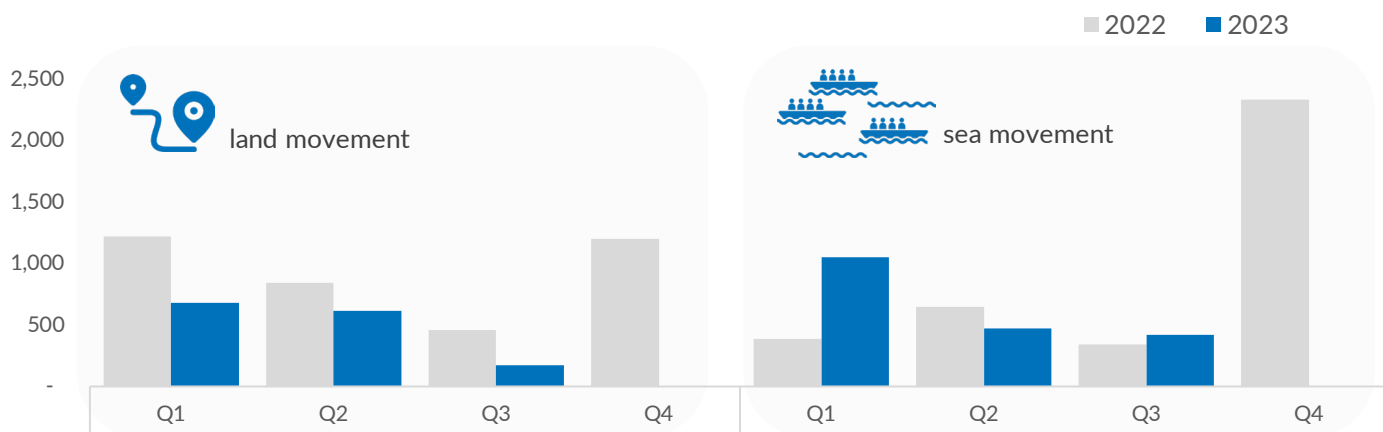
Land and sea journey routes taken in 2022-2023



Land and sea movements are often combined in multiple sub-routes, covering various countries, to reach the intended destination. While efforts are made to capture all land and sea movements, it is recognized that many journeys are not known due to their clandestine nature. The information in this report is compiled and triangulated from various sources including governments, partners, UNHCR operations, media reports and interviews with refugees. All data is provisional and subject to change.

² Source: UNHCR

Land and sea movements – quarterly trends



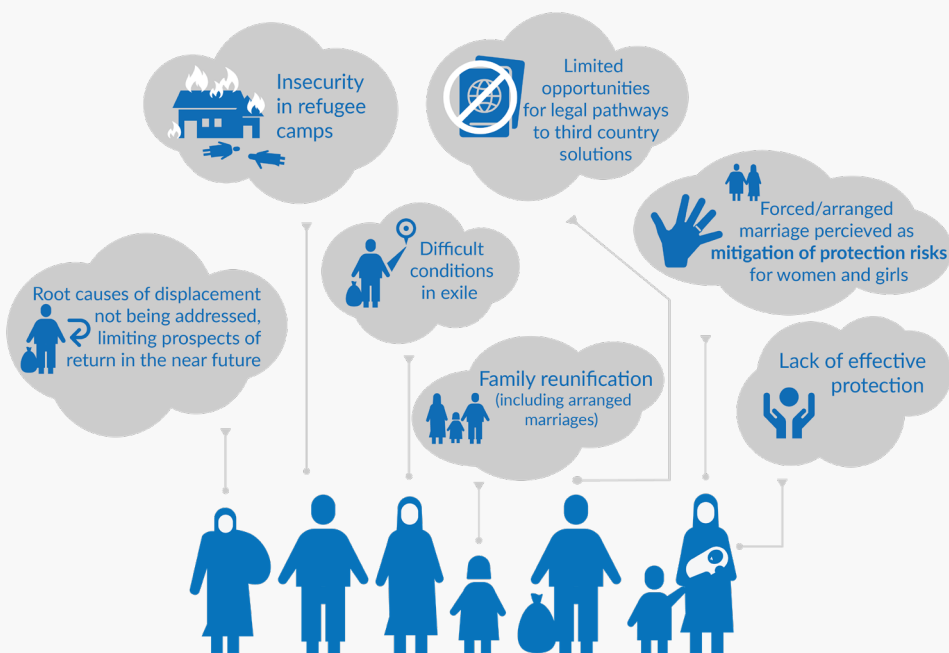
REASONS FOR EMBARKING ON DANGEROUS JOURNEYS

Rohingya refugees are the world’s largest stateless population, with the lack of citizenship being a key challenge in accessing basic rights and protection. The majority of Rohingya refugees have indicated they wish to return home to Myanmar once conditions for a voluntary, safe and sustainable return are met, including addressing the root causes of their displacement. Pending return, Rohingya refugees hope to contribute to their host communities, despite ongoing limitations on accessing resilience activities, including education, skills development and livelihoods, which often leave them vulnerable to despair and exploitation.

The situation in asylum countries is increasingly protracted and humanitarian funding is dwindling. In June 2023, food rations in the camps in Bangladesh were cut to USD 8 per person per month.

Other factors compelling Rohingya refugees to travel by land and sea

UNHCR assessments and consultations with Rohingya refugees indicate high awareness of the risks related to movements by land and sea with the intention of reaching other countries in the region. With regards to sea movements, a substantial number (48 per cent), of such attempts are unsuccessful, with disembarkations taking place in Myanmar or Bangladesh, leaving refugees in an even more vulnerable situation. However, despite the risks, many take the desperate decision to leave in search of protection.

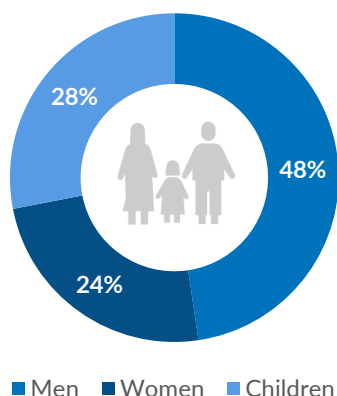


PROFILES - THE INDIVIDUALS BEHIND THE FIGURES

Age and gender dynamics

Prior to 2015, the majority of those undertaking maritime movements were men. However, the gender balance has shifted in recent years as the number of Rohingya refugee women and children on sea routes steadily increased since mid-2015, with peaks in 2020 – 2021 when two-thirds of those embarking on sea journeys were women and children. This trend changed in 2022 – 2023 (as of 31 August 2023) when women and children represented 46 per cent of those making maritime movements and the remaining 54 per cent were men. This shift might indicate a deteriorating protection environment for women and girls traveling by sea. In contrast, analysis of gender dynamics within land movements reveals that 58 per cent were women and children (27 per cent and 31 per cent respectively) while 42 per cent were male travelers. Combining land and sea movements, the majority (52 per cent) were women and children while adult men represented 48 per cent of those moving from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Gender & age breakdown for land and sea movements | 2022-23



Among Rohingya refugees attempting land and sea movements, **specific profiles face protection risks and challenges:**



TREATMENT OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES ON THE MOVE

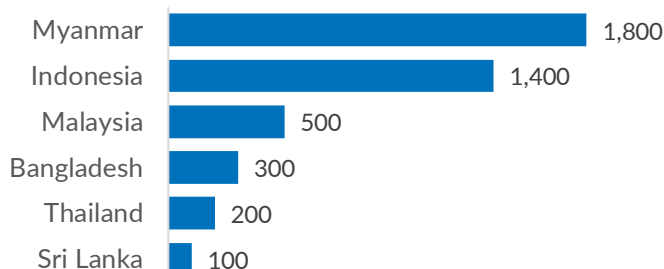
Despite the maritime obligations of all States in the region and the political commitments made by all Bali Process member states in the March 2016 Bali Declaration, the lack of a regional mechanism for predictable search and rescue and safe disembarkation has led to varied and ad-hoc responses. While on land routes, Rohingya refugees continue to be at risk of detention and other protection risks.

- Indonesia has consistently stepped forward to disembark boats of Rohingya refugees, in line with the Indonesian Presidential Regulation (No. 125 of 2016). Search and rescue missions were carried out on various occasions for vessels in distress, and six boats with 809 Rohingya refugees were allowed to safely disembark (between January and August 2023) in Indonesia and provided with humanitarian support. In addition, protection-sensitive anti-trafficking screenings were conducted in the designated reception centres.
- Within Rakhine State (Myanmar), 1,200 individuals who have attempted journeys by land or boat are known to have been arrested and charged for violating the 1949 Registration Act or the 1947 Immigration Act. As of 31 August 2023, 810 individuals were sentenced while 313 are under trial. Humanitarian partners provide legal counseling, court representation and in-kind emergency assistance to those in detention and facilitate family reunification and return to places of origin after release.

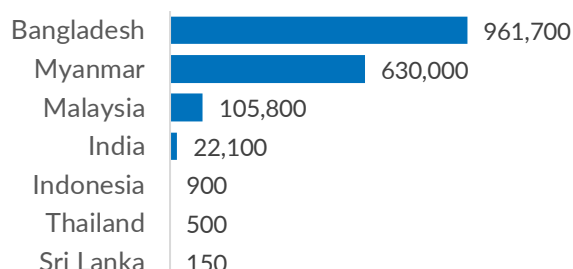
RESPONSIBILITY-SHARING

- Indonesia's approach represents a good practice that could be further expanded upon by establishing regional collaboration and mechanisms for predictable and equitable search and rescue and disembarkations.
- Responsibility sharing could be more evenly distributed in a collective effort to save lives along the sea and land routes. This could be achieved through a regional response that encompasses search and rescue, safe disembarkations, protection-sensitive and victim-centered approaches, strengthened efforts to combat trafficking, coupled with local and third country solutions.

Known Rohingya refugees arriving by sea - Disembarkations per country³ | January 2022 - August 2023



Rohingya refugees registered with UNHCR & Forcibly Displaced in Myanmar⁴ | June 2023



ACCESS TO ASYLUM

UNHCR continues to advocate for access to asylum for refugees and to strengthen protection-sensitive entry systems along sea and land routes. Refugees, including those moving onwards, should in principle be allowed to access territory and must be protected against *refoulement* (return to a country where their life or freedom would be at risk) in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention and international customary law. The principle of *non-refoulement applies to all individuals in need of international protection*.



A boat that carried Rohingya refugees across the Andaman Sea remains anchored offshore after the refugees disembarked at a beach in Aceh, Indonesia on 8 January, 2023. © UNHCR/Kenzie Eagan

³ Disembarkations also include situations where a boat was intercepted in transit by authorities and the passengers arrested. These situations are the majority of disembarkations in Myanmar and also applies to Bangladesh.

⁴ including IDPs and in-situ stateless.

KEY PROTECTION ISSUES

Rohingya refugees face significant protection risks before, during and after arriving at their destination.



ARREST & DETENTION	TRAFFICKING & SMUGGLING	WOMEN & GIRLS ON THE MOVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 2,200 Rohingya refugees are currently known to be held in detention outside Myanmar. Rohingya refugees are frequently held in prolonged or indefinite detention, with limited access to due process. In Myanmar, laws preventing freedom of movement are strictly enforced, leading to 1,200 Rohingya refugees detained (Jan – Aug 2023). While in detention, Rohingya refugee men and boys as well as women and girls face GBV risks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interagency Anti-Trafficking Working Group (ATWG) in Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh) identified, referred, and assisted 243 Victims of trafficking from January to June 2023. The ATWG figures should not be interpreted as showing the extent of prevalence of human trafficking in the camps. Human trafficking networks frequently operate across borders and are connected to broader transnational criminal syndicates. Threats to physical integrity, include abuse, torture and death and are often perpetrated by traffickers or smugglers. Rohingya refugees are often denied the use of telephones or other means of communication by smugglers and traffickers and may get separated from their family along the journey. Initially, and unaware of the risks, individuals may willingly undertake a journey that later turns into a situation of trafficking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender-based violence (harassment, rape, exploitation, violence, and enslavement) are common risks women and girls face. Rohingya refugee women and girls are particularly at risk to be kidnapped and sold into marriage or sexual or domestic servitude.
DURING TRAVEL		THEFT, FRAUD & EXTORTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unseaworthy vessels can lead to shipwreck and death or severe distress situations at sea with a lack of essential supplies, such as food and water. Cases of malnutrition have been identified as well as skin diseases and communicable diseases caught during the journey. During land travel, Rohingya refugees are often deprived of water and food and suffer traffic accidents. For both travel modes, refugees are faced with sickness and medical emergencies, and are unable to access medical assistance without risking detention. Travelling in dire conditions can lead to refugees being separated from their family members during the journey, thus increasing the risk of re-trafficking. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smugglers often take money without rendering the promised service or request a higher fee than initially agreed, threatening to stop the travel or harm refugees or their family members unless they pay more money. Smugglers and traffickers are also known to take the belongings of the Rohingya refugees, including phones or personal documents. Smugglers and traffickers are known to make false promises, such as of marriage or employment.

UNHCR is grateful for the critical support provided by donors that have contributed to UNHCR's Myanmar Situation response, as well as those that contribute to UNHCR programmes with unearmarked funds for use at the global level or softly earmarked funds for the Asia-Pacific region. For more details, please see the latest funding update [here](#).

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For more information please visit the [Myanmar Situation page](#) and the [Rohingya Refugee Maritime dashboard](#) on the Operation Data Portal.