

MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Research Findings on Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia

CASE STUDIES

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants First Edition | March 2024



This document contains case studies from research by the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants in Southeast Asia. The full research study, including interactive and static maps and graphs, infographics, case studies and research methodology, can be accessed at: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/som-observatory.html. The Observatory is UNODC's principal knowledge source to develop the evidence base on smuggling of migrants, as a service to Member States to inform their counter-smuggling responses to combat the crime of smuggling of migrants and to protect the rights of smuggled migrants.



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Case Study 1: 26-year-old Rohingya man from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand

Indications of: referral to smuggler by friend, smuggling by land, corruption, smuggling payment by family member, dangerous travel conditions, lack of travel/ID documents

I left [Myanmar] because I felt unsafe and I was unable to live in my own village anymore due to the fights between the military and the PDF [People's Defence Force]. The military came to my village several times and burned everything, which forced everyone to flee.

I decided to go to Thailand with my wife and a cousin. I asked around and got in touch with other villagers who were already in Thailand at that time, and they gave me the phone number of the smuggler. I contacted him and he told me to wait for him to reach out. After two days, he called and asked me to get ready to travel in three days. We started our journey by going to the smuggler's house near the Thai border in Moh Taung [Myanmar], where we joined a big group of 60-70 people from other places. We all gathered there and waited for transportation.

I chose Thailand because I had worked there previously for two years from 2016 to 2018, so it was easier to go back.

It took us eight days to reach Thailand. We started from my village at around five in the morning, then we took a minibus in the afternoon to Moh Taung. From there we took another minibus and then we had to walk for the whole night until we crossed the border the next morning. At the border, the smuggler had a car ready, but we could not depart immediately because there were some military and police patrolling the area, so we had to sit and wait there for the whole day.

In the evening, we all got arrested by the police, put on a bus and sent back to Moh Taung [Myanmar]. The journey back took around thirty minutes and we were handed back to the *Tatmadaw*, the Myanmar Military. In the morning, the smugglers made a deal with the Myanmar Military and they handed us back to them.

We rested for four days before attempting the journey for the second time. This time, the route was different - we took a big pickup truck for one hour and we walked for the whole day. We rested for two hours during the entire journey. After we crossed into Thailand, we were put in another big truck used to transport vegetables or livestock. We stayed overnight in Thailand and the next day we continued the journey and arrived in Mahachai [just south of Bangkok, Thailand].

I decided to use a smuggler because I didn't know the route to get to Thailand and I couldn't obtain a passport because the passport office was closed at the time, so using a smuggler was my only option.

The journey cost around 12,000 Thai Baht (US\$344) per person. My brother is the one who paid the smugglers when we arrived at Mahachai, using money that I had borrowed from him.

The fee included everything, we didn't have to pay extra even though the smugglers had to bail us out from the Myanmar Military because it was part of the deal with the smugglers. They guaranteed that we would arrive in Thailand.

Overall, the journey was difficult, and we faced harsh conditions at times, mostly while walking through the forest at night. During this walk, some women and girls got injured because it was dark, and we had to walk through the bush. We also faced the risk of falling in the mountains. We were not allowed to bring anything, not even a bag. We could only bring our phones or other valuable items that could fit in our pockets. When we got arrested, I was very worried.

The police didn't allow us to use our phones and we had to turn them off, which meant that we couldn't contact the smugglers immediately. It was only after we got handed back to the Myanmar Military that the soldiers contacted the smuggler.

Things changed since the last time I came. Back then it took only two days and I didn't need to walk, I just took the bus to cross the border. But now there was barbed wire along that border and we couldn't take the same route anymore.

Right now, I will try to find a job and documentation first. I will work here [in Bangkok] for two years and afterwards, I will move to Phuket city [southern Thailand].

Interview Code: TH_MYN_SB3

Case Study 2: 19 year-old Chin man from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia

Indications of: referral by people from the village, borrowed money from people in the village, unsafe living conditions, inability to obtain legal documents, smuggling by land, a smuggling network, possibility of deprivation of liberty

I left Myanmar because I had no future and was unsafe there due to the constant fighting. Every time the soldiers came, they killed and abused people, so we knew it was not safe for us to stay there.

I contacted people from my village who had some experience with the journey to Malaysia. If you have connections with people who know some agents [smugglers], it is easy, but if you don't, it's going to be difficult. When I decided to take the journey, I did not have a travel document and I was supposed to apply for one. But to apply, I had to go to Hakha, the capital city of Chin State [Myanmar], which was risky because I could encounter soldiers. I was planning to travel and apply for the document there, but there was fighting going on and the application centre was closed, so I couldn't apply.

I decided to travel with another person from my village, we contacted the agent and we let him plan the journey, I expected it to take ten days from my hometown to Malaysia.

I chose Malaysia because it has people from Myanmar, so I thought it would be easier for me to move there.

I travelled from my hometown in Chin State to Kale, then to Mandalay and then to Yangon [Myanmar]. Up until Yangon I was on my own, then I met the agent there and we travelled both on foot and by car. The agents took us to one place and when we arrived there, different agents took over. We travelled with a group of about 60 people from different areas and ethnicities in Myanmar and not just Chin.

From Yangon, we travelled north to Bago [Myanmar] through the jungle and never went along the main road.

After entering Thailand, we took a 4x4 car and we only travelled at night. The group was initially divided among three cars when we were crossing the border but after we entered Thailand, we were divided into smaller groups of around 25 people.

There were a lot of agents; one main agent and different associates recruiting people. There were around 60 people from different areas ready to take the journey. All the agents we met throughout were from the same network and working together. I think at the Thai-Malaysia border, the agent contacted his associates in Malaysia and they came and picked us up from the border. Then the agent took us to Kuala Lumpur and arranged for a room for us and we then got picked up by friends and relatives. I remember that the agents we met in Malaysia could speak the local language.

The journey was far more difficult than I expected, it took us eight days from Yangon to Kuala Lumpur. Before starting I expected that the agent would take us in a car where each person gets

a seat, and we would just travel. But instead, people were crammed into small cars in horrible conditions.

The agents were 20-40 years of age and as far as I know; it was Burmese people in Yangon and Thai people in Thailand.

The reason I had to use agents to travel is because regular travel is not possible. No one can travel by air because Burmese soldiers have closed the route and it is also very expensive.

The only instructions I received from the agent were that in case I got arrested by the authorities, I should not try to escape, and the agents would come and save me. But in our group, no one got arrested.

The agent provided at least two meals per day after crossing the Thai border from Myanmar. It was fine, even though sometimes it was not enough. During the journey, we didn't travel through the cities. Sometimes we stayed in jungles and we had to cook for ourselves, but they provided us with ingredients to cook.

Overall, the journey was scary because we only travelled at night. We couldn't use any lights and had to walk in the dark and were just following the person in front of us without knowing what was going to happen. Sometimes people would get lost and we would have to go back to find them. We were not allowed to speak or make any noise during the journey.

I paid the agent when I arrived in Yangon [Myanmar] - about 4.1 million Myanmar Kyat (US\$1,955) in cash, which is the normal rate. They promised to take care of everything and take me from Myanmar to Malaysia for 4.1 million Kyat, including everything. I borrowed some money from the people in my village and now I'm repaying them.

My experience was better than I expected. I had heard some stories of agents abusing people, but I'm not sure what they experienced exactly.

Interview Code: MY_CHN_HY2

Case Study 3: 19-year-old woman from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand

Indications of: referral through family, smuggling network, loan to finance the trip, difficult travelling conditions, risk of death

I wanted to come to Thailand to find better work opportunities and to help my family financially because they weren't doing very well. I saw people from my village leaving for Thailand to work and they were making a lot of money, so I decided to try.

My two sisters had gone to Thailand before me with a smuggler who helped them cross the border, so they contacted him and made all the arrangements for me. I travelled with one of my cousins and two other friends who also wanted to come to Thailand for work.

We started the journey from our village, where we met the smuggler. We took several buses, passing through Yangon, Mawlamyine and Myawaddy [Myanmar], where we met another smuggler who helped us cross the border until we reached Mae Sot, Thailand. There we were met by a different smuggler and we were taken to a restaurant to spend the night and rest.

The following morning, they put us in a pickup truck and headed to the mountains, where we were handed over to another smuggler. We were a big group of around 70 people and they dropped us at the foot of the mountain. There we started a long and very tiring journey through the mountains, which lasted for eight days, the details of which were so horrible that I forgot them.

After eight days, we reached Kanchanaburi, Thailand, where we rested and spent the night in a beauty salon, and from there, we finally reached Bangkok the next day.

From what I heard from my sisters and other people, the journey was supposed to take us two to three days, but it ended up taking 14 days, which was very tiring and scary for me.

All the smugglers we met were Thai men and were over 25 years old. I am not sure if the drivers of the pickup trucks were also smugglers or not.

My sister paid the smuggler using money borrowed from her neighbours at a high interest rate. She currently works in a fish processing factory here in Bangkok and I will have to work to earn money and pay her back.

The smuggler agreed to take us to Thailand for 25,000 Thai Baht (US\$720) each. I spent an additional 2,500 Baht (\$72) on food, clothing and other things while preparing for the journey. The payment was made after I reached Thailand; my sisters came to meet me and paid the entire amount in cash to the smuggler.

Before the journey, the smuggler did not specify any routes because the routes change depending on the situation at the border. Also, during the journey, 17 people from the group lost their way while travelling through the mountains and we had to go back and find those people, which took an additional day. Overall, I regret taking the route I took and using the smuggler I used.

It was very difficult for me to survive in the mountains. I remember when I was in the mountains, I heard some gunshots, and then there were rumours about the authorities searching for illegal border crossers. It was all just bits and pieces of information, but it was a terrifying time and even when I asked about it, the smuggler couldn't provide clear answers either. I remember feeling a sense of urgency, knowing that I had to make it through and reach my destination because my family was counting on me. There were around 100 people stranded in the mountains, and some of them escaped.

During that part of the journey, I often yearned to go back home, but I couldn't and it was an incredibly difficult time for me. I managed to find water along the way and drank from whatever source I could find. As for food, I carried dry items such as Mama noodles and even though I was resourceful, I still faced difficulties in finding enough food and water. Climbing the mountains was also very challenging, it was scary because there was a risk of falling. We had to be careful and hold onto each other while walking at night because we couldn't use lights.

Interview Code: TH_MYN_FI06

Case Study 4: 39-year-old Somali man interviewed in Indonesia

Indications of: referral through family, unsafe living conditions, robbery and deprivation of liberty by smugglers, smuggling by air, inability to work in country of interview

I left Somalia due to the war and conflict in the city where I lived. I didn't feel safe living in the country anymore and I decided to leave.

I didn't want to leave Somalia, but my family organized everything; they found the contact of a smuggler through some friends. I travelled alone and did not have time to prepare for the journey as I had to leave two or three days after my family found the smuggler.

Initially, Indonesia was not my intended destination, but it was a destination that the smuggler chose for me.

I travelled from Mogadishu, Somalia to Kuala Lumpur by air, transiting through Dubai [United Arab Emirates]. I obtained a visa on arrival, which Somalis are eligible for. I stayed in Malaysia for a week waiting for the smuggler to make the arrangements for the boat journey to Indonesia. I remember the boat only had Somali refugees on it and for the most part, the journey went as planned. However, I felt cheated by the smugglers.

The smugglers operated in a network that included Somalis, but also Indonesians and Malaysians, and they were all men. I had to use a smuggler because I didn't know any other way to travel, and my family also wanted me to go with a smuggler.

My family paid the smuggler US\$2,500 for the journey to Indonesia, the entire amount was paid at the beginning of the journey. Using this amount, the smuggler was able to book flight tickets and arrange for my visa and I didn't have to pay for anything. However, I'm still unable to pay my family back because I am not working in Indonesia.

Looking back, I don't feel like I had a positive experience. The smugglers detained me in Malaysia for two weeks, and then when we arrived in Indonesia, they stole everything from us as we got off the boat, including our phones. I wasn't carrying documents, but they stole my clothes and everything I had with me. In my opinion, the journey was very risky. When we arrived, the smugglers told us there was a UNHCR office in Indonesia, but they did not tell us where or how to find it. I was only able to reach them later through help from the Somali community.

When I arrived, I didn't have any belongings, everything that I had was stolen by smugglers. However, the local Somali community assisted me and directed me to UNHCR where I was able to apply for asylum.

My Refugee Status Determination process is still ongoing and I continue to sustain myself using the allowance I get from UNHCR. I do not have an alternative but to wait for resettlement, as I have no money to travel anywhere else.

Interview Code: IND_SOM_SB1

Case Study 5: 42-year-old Afghan man interviewed in Indonesia

Indications of: referral to smuggler by friend, smuggling by air, document fraud for the purpose of smuggling, enabling irregular stay for the purpose of smuggling, organized smuggling group, corruption, payment in instalments, hawala

I'm from [eastern] Afghanistan, I am married. I graduated from high school, but I couldn't pursue my education further. Before I came to Indonesia, I used to work as a driver, transporting passengers from one city to another in my taxi.

There were a few reasons why I had to flee my country. Firstly, because I am Hazara [ethnicity], and the country is not safe for us. Secondly, because of my previous job as a driver, transporting passengers from [city of origin] to Kabul and other places, in addition to the fact that I also used to transport alcohol to some locations. One day after I got caught transporting alcohol, I realized that my life was in danger. My car is still with the Taliban, they would come regularly to the taxi junction to look for me, so I had to leave the country. [...]

To prepare for my journey, I had a friend who helped me get in contact with a smuggler. I spoke with him on the phone and stayed underground for ten days in Kabul until I could get a visa. The smugglers gave me a visa to travel to India. But for my onward travel after India, I don't know how the smugglers arranged everything to Indonesia. [...] I asked the smugglers to take me anywhere, and they chose Indonesia because they believed it to be the safest option.

I started my journey from Afghanistan to India. I got the visa without any problem and I travelled by air. In India, I stayed for twelve days, and there were no issues as the smugglers assisted me. Then I went to Malaysia for one night, before arriving in Surabaya [Indonesia]. There were no significant problems, but there was always a sense of nervousness and fear during boarding.

The smuggler I spoke with in Kabul was the one in charge of communication with the rest of the team. I did not know much about the visas for Malaysia and the subsequent destinations.

I'm sure someone was bribed to make the whole process easy; some officers somewhere were bribed to let us in, I am very sure of that. The main smuggler gave us all the instructions and we followed his instructions to go to specific immigration counters when we arrived in Malaysia. We were very scared, but he tried to reassure us.

I trusted my friend who had connections on the other side in Indonesia, and my friend trusted the smuggler whose contact he shared with me. So, based on my friend's advice, I decided to use the smuggler to come here. Because I knew if I wanted to come to Indonesia by myself, it would not be easy.

To pay for our journey, I used my savings and had to sell all the jewellery my wife had. We were able to collect around US\$9,000. This was the total money we paid to arrive in Indonesia - it covered our visas to India and Malaysia. The smuggler also purchased our flight tickets with this money and some of it was also used to pay for our accommodation in India for twelve days. I did not pay any money along the way for my accommodation. The money was blocked [lodged with a *hawaladar*] in Afghanistan, and only after I arrived in Indonesia, they released the money.

Everything was fine until we reached India, we had valid visas and passports. But as soon as we started our journey to Malaysia, we felt a little bit unsafe because we knew it was illegal and there was a concern that if we were caught, it would be terrible. I don't know about the others, but I know that we were very scared, because we knew we were doing something wrong.

We did not end up having any problems during the journey. The smuggler had arranged for everything, so we were okay. My current situation is not good here in Indonesia. I'm currently not allowed to work, and my wife and I are studying online: English and computer classes. We do want to go to a third country, but legally with the help of the UN.

Interview Code: IND_AFG_SB1

Case Study 6: 45-year-old Indonesian woman interviewed in Malaysia

Indications of: referral to smuggler by friend, smuggling by air and land, corruption

I am from Jawa Timur [Central Java], Indonesia. I have three children - the youngest one is four years old and they are all currently in Indonesia with my mother. I was a labourer working on a farm in Indonesia, and now I don't have a job in Malaysia, I just take care of domestic chores in the house.

I decided to come to Malaysia for a better life and to find work. I always wanted to come to Malaysia, I have many friends and relatives here. I spoke to them and they gave me information on how to travel and one of them shared the contact number of the *tekong* [smuggler] they used to reach Malaysia. I contacted him and he helped me with my passport application.

I was travelling with my husband, I did not have a plan for transport or the route I was going to take – it was organized by the *tekong*. He decided on it after we told him how much money we could afford to pay. I knew that I could come to Malaysia by air and arrive in one day, but it was more expensive - 20 million Indonesian Rupiah (US\$1,350) and I couldn't afford it.

My intended destination was Puchong [Selangor, Malaysia]. I have friends from Indonesia and some relatives living here.

Two more people whom I did not know came on the trip with us, we planned to meet in Surabaya [Indonesia], at a meeting point decided by the *tekong*. My husband and I took a bus to Surabaya where we met the *tekong*, we paid 25 million Rupiah (\$1,688), and we travelled from Surabaya to Batam [Indonesia] on a domestic flight. From Batam, we took a tourist ferry to Johor, Malaysia. From there, we took a bus to Kuala Lumpur bus terminal. From there, the *tekong* brought us to Puchong using a private car.

The *tekong*, an Indonesian man around 50 years old, was with us from Surabaya. In Johor [Malaysia], he paid money to the immigration authorities when we entered Malaysia and told them that we were visiting our relatives.

We planned to travel with the help of the *tekong* because it is difficult to get to Malaysia on our own, especially because of the paperwork. My friends also told me that the chance of getting into Malaysia is lower if we come on our own and that some people get rejected at immigration if they don't use a *tekong*, because the *tekong* pays a bribe to the immigration authorities, which they call "guarantee money".

All contacts before the journey were made through phone calls and we travelled with the *tekong*, along with four other people, including my husband.

Using a *tekong* is a faster and easier way to reach Malaysia. Otherwise, we don't know how to deal with all the paperwork (applying for a passport, etc.). There were also instances of the immigration authorities in Johor denying entry to Indonesians trying to make the journey on their own when they were suspicious of the migrant's intentions of travel to Malaysia [entering as a tourist but remaining to work].

We did not face any risks during the journey, the *tekong* took us on a normal domestic flight (Surabaya ID-Batam ID), a tourist ferry (Batam ID-Johor MY) and a tourist bus (Johor MY-Kuala Lumpur MY). The services provided by the *tekong* included transport, food, accommodation in a hotel, passport (he helped with the application and we got the passport a week before the trip) and "guarantee money" to the immigration authorities.

We paid 25 million Rupiah (\$1,688) for two people, using our savings. We paid the full amount in cash to the *tekong* in Indonesia before travelling. I also heard of people paying around 14 million Rupiah (\$945) per person.

I consider our experience to have been a positive one overall, but we have heard of cases where the *tekong* took the money but left the migrants in Batam [Indonesia] instead of bringing them to Malaysia. I also heard that there are more risks for women travelling with *tekongs*. I also heard that some *tekongs* are Indonesian women who try to recruit other women and the employers pay the fees.

Interview Code: MY_IND_HY1

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