

## Maritime Movements of Rohingya Refugees in South-East Asia

January – 8 May 2020

### Key trends and developments

#### Maritime movements

- Since January 2020, about 2,000 Rohingya, including many women and children, have reportedly embarked on a journey across the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. The large majority left from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.
- Maritime movements have increased almost threefold in the first five months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

#### Safe and orderly disembarkation

- More than 1,400 Rohingya have disembarked to date. The large majority disembarked in Bangladesh and Malaysia. Those who disembarked in Bangladesh did so after being stranded at sea for several months or following a shipwreck.
- The latest disembarkation occurred on 7 May, when the Bangladesh navy rescued 280 people stranded at sea after being abandoned by smugglers. The rescuees were transferred to Bhasan Char.
- Before they decided to transfer rescuees to Bhasan Char or turn away boats, Bangladesh and Malaysia had demonstrated in prior disembarkations from February to April that health screening and quarantine arrangements can be implemented so that people can disembark in a safe, orderly and dignified manner and reunite with their communities following quarantine.

#### Factors motivating onward movements

- The recent movements from Bangladesh continue to be motivated by restrictions on livelihoods, education, and movement as well as host community tensions and the lack of foreseeable solutions. There has been an increase in women and girls seeking to leave the camps' crowded environment in Bangladesh to join family or arranged marriages in Malaysia.
- To date, UNHCR has not received any indications that COVID-19 fears have prompted the increase in movements.

### Issues of Concern

#### Vessels stranded at sea

- Up to two vessels are reportedly still stranded at sea in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. It is estimated that up to 600 people, including many women and children, are at sea and in need of rescue.

#### Interception measures

- On 16 April, Malaysia intercepted a vessel carrying about 330 Rohingya, preventing its onward passage towards Malaysia. The ship was escorted back to international waters after food was provided on humanitarian grounds. Passengers from this vessel disembarked in Bangladesh on 7 May and were transferred to Bhasan Char.
- Interception measures including pushback practices deny access to safety for refugees in distress at sea and can directly or indirectly result in refoulement.

#### Dangerous journey

- At least 135 Rohingya refugees have died or gone missing in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal in the first four months of 2020. Refugees at sea face life-threatening distress situations due to unseaworthy vessels, unpredictable sea and weather conditions, shortages of food and water, and physical and sexual abuse by smugglers.