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Immediately step up efforts to rescue thousands at grave risk at sea

South East Asia

South East Asian governments must step up urgent search and rescue efforts to ensure that thousands of people stranded in boats are not left in dire circumstances and at risk of death, Amnesty International said, as another boat carrying hundreds of people thought to be migrants and asylum seekers in desperate conditions is currently awaiting rescue off the Thai coast.

Amnesty International has confirmed that a boat crammed with some 350 people, including children, is currently drifting off the coast of Thailand and Malaysia. The hundreds of people, believed to be from Myanmar or Bangladesh, have been at sea for “many days”, possibly more than two months. Their crew abandoned them several days ago. The passengers are without food and water and are in urgent need of medical care. Thai Navy vessels are currently searching for the boat.

“Governments in South East Asia must act immediately to stop this unfolding humanitarian crisis. It is crucial that countries in the region launch coordinated search and rescue operations to save those at sea – anything less could be a death sentence for thousands of people,” said Kate Schuetze, Amnesty International Asia Pacific Researcher.

“It’s harrowing to think that hundreds of people are right now drifting in a boat perilously close to dying, without food or water, and without even knowing where they are.”

Earlier today, a boat carrying some 500 people was found off the coast of Penang island in northern Malaysia. Malaysian authorities this week said they would use punitive measures, including pushing back boats and deporting migrants and refugees, to send the “right message” to irregular arrivals.

“The Malaysian authorities have a duty to protect and not punish the hundreds of people who reached the country’s shores today. They must be given the medical care they desperately need, and in no circumstances be sent back to sea or transferred to a place where their rights or lives are put at risk,” said Kate Schuetze.

“Comments by the authorities that they will turn back those arriving on boats are an affront to human dignity. What’s more, if authorities follow through with these threats, they will be violating Malaysia’s international legal obligations.”

In the last few days, increasing numbers of people from Myanmar and Bangladesh have arrived by boat in Malaysia and Indonesia. At least one boat with some 400 people believed to be Rohingya was on Monday towed out to sea by the Indonesian Navy, off the coast of Aceh, after it was provided with food and fuel.

A crackdown on irregular arrivals in Thailand seems to have forced smugglers and traffickers to look for new routes. The International Organization for Migration believes that 8,000 people may still be on boats close to Thailand.

The thousands of people who have fled Bangladesh and Myanmar include vulnerable migrants, refugees such as Muslim Rohingya fleeing discrimination and violence in Myanmar, and victims of human trafficking. Many are desperate enough to put their own lives at risk by braving dangerous journeys at sea in order to escape unbearable conditions at home.

“The thousands of lives at risk should be the immediate priority, but the root causes of this crisis must also be addressed. The fact that thousands of Rohingya prefer a dangerous boat journey they may not survive to staying in Myanmar speaks volumes about the conditions they face there,” said Kate Schuetze.