

Sailing to Malaysia: desperation of fortune seekers

CONTEXT:

During the last couple of years, both the national and international media have been covering the news on the desperate attempts of traveling from Bangladesh to Malaysia by sea route.

Such a crossing was first used by some stateless Rohingyas in the mid-1990s. Following that an international human smuggling network established to transport desperate people from Bangladesh to Malaysia. At recent times, more and more impoverished Bangladeshis are joining in this deadly voyage for better opportunities. There is no official figure of people travelled through this deadly sea route, but the general estimation is that on average 5,000 Bangladeshi people take part in such perilous journey annually during October-April season when the sea remains calmer.

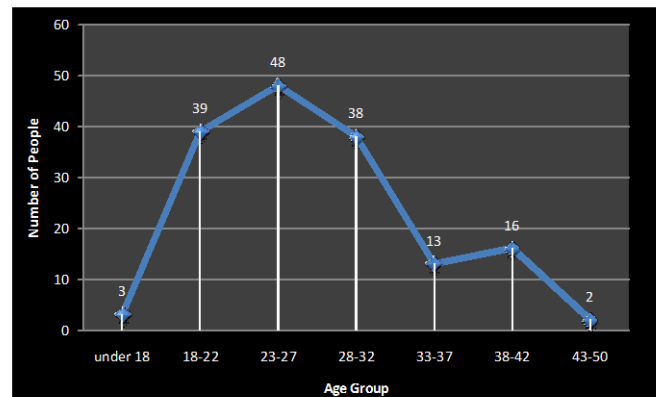
During September - December 2013, OKUP received some 400 complaints about the clandestine journey to Malaysia in its project areas in Arahazara Upazila under Narayanganj district as well as Narsingdi Sadar. The incidents made panic among the general people in these areas.

In such a situation, OKUP undertook investigation to understand the context and consequences of such irregular migration. OKUP conducted 158 one-to-one surveys among those complaints filed by the families who at least one member fled to Malaysia by boat. The survey followed a semi-structured questionnaire. In addition, it took interviews of six returnees who had managed to return home from Malaysia after the deadly experiences of the journey. Further, a focus group discussion with the local actors was also conducted to understand the general opinions and perceptions of the locals.



WHO TRAVELLED?

Nearly 76% of 158 migrants who travelled to Malaysia by boat are between 18-30 years, 20% of them are 31-40 years, and 4% are either below 18 or over 40 years.



At least 70% of those are married and having children. More than half (53%) of them have never enrolled into the formal schools while the rest 44% has only primary education (1-5 class).

In regards to occupation, 13% were unemployed before sailing to Malaysia and the rest were engaged in different types of occupations - like 14% were the workers in the local textile mills (known as power loom), 13% were mechanic worker, 13% were rickshaw puller, 8% were small sellers and 7% lived on agricultural activities.

WHY TRAVELLED?

Several factors act behind such perilous journey of irregular migration. The most important factor is the **strong presence of the vicious cycle of the local agents and the transnational racket of the human smugglers**.

The second important factor is the offer of “**on-arrival payment**”. This means that the migrants do not need to pay any fee before departure, the payment will be made only after reaching in Malaysia. Such an offer motivates the young fortune seekers to ‘try the luck’ without any financial investment. Lack of education, awareness and the dream of earning ‘**more money by short time**’ also drive the migrant to take such a life risk deadly journey.

The local people consider that the “**slow and apparently futile ‘G-2-G’ recruitment**” is another important factor to push people to take such irregular migration to Malaysia. The so-called “quick and speedy” departure, no requirement of travel documents, and the presence of relatives and family members in Malaysia also act as motivational factors to inspire people to choose the route.

“One day one of my close relatives asked me if I could change my luck by going to Malaysia! He told me that going to Malaysia by the ship was easy and cheap. There are lots of works in Malaysia and I could earn good amount of money every month.” **Jibon** (not his real name) a returnee from Araizahar Upazila of Narayangonj district said while sharing his experience.

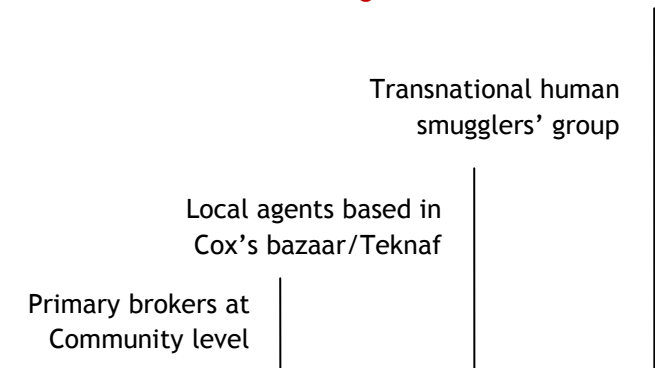
Another returnee **Yeakub** from Narsingdi district said “Broker assured that I could get a job in the construction sector in Malaysia in where I would easily earn BDT 50,000 per month. He also told I would not need any document for the travel and I would pay only BDT 180,000 after my arrival in Malaysia”.

Sumon, another returnee from Narsingdi district said “The local middleman told me that going to Malaysia by ship was safe and comfortable. I would face no problem at all. I need to pay only BDT 5000 before travelling and the rest amount of BDT 120,000 need to be paid after arrival in Malaysia.” Other returnees who interviewed also expressed almost same story.

HOW TRAVELLED?

The transnational racket of the human smugglers which was emerged in the 1990s to assist the Rohingya fleeing from the communal violence in Myanmar, have become more organized and well established in recent years. The racket has set several layers of agents from the very grassroots of the targeted areas in Bangladesh to the destination. The very **primary agents** who are mostly responsible to motivate the people and make them reached at Teknaf or Cox’s Bazar area of Bangladesh are either close relatives or friends or co-workers or fellow village men.

Trafficking Racket



The second layer of the racket consists of the local people from Cox’s Bazar and/or Teknaf area. These groups of agents are responsible to collect all fortune seekers from different parts of the country, keep them under their custody until they are handed over to the third layer of the racket.

The third layer is comprised of citizens from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia who operates the journey, collects money from the family of the victim’s in the form of abduction and helped them cross the border.

Several case studies of the survivors who somehow managed to return home disclosed the horrible picture of the journey. Five out of six returnees interviewed for the study mentioned they had been motivated by someone who was either relative or co-worker or the fellow village men. One person mentioned that he had found a mobile phone number on a note of a local currency. He called the phone number out of his curiosity and was introduced to a person. The person kept calling him back very often and made a good friendship over a short period of time. Once the person offered him go to Malaysia by ship. He trusted on him and agreed to the proposal. According to the returnees, none of the local brokers travelled to Cox’s Bazar along with them; they gave ‘step by step’ instruction over the phone. Some returnees stated that they had been treated well by the local brokers at Cox’s Bazar and/or Teknaf area until they were boarded into the so called ‘ship’. The other people were locked and

miss-treated as soon as they were gripped at the hand of the agents in Cox's Bazar or Teknaf areas.

"I had been locked as soon as I reached in a house at 'Bandar Teknaf' following the over-phone instruction by the first broker. I had been there three days until I was forced to board into a trawler" said Yeakub, a survivor.

Another survivor, Jibon said *"I was treated well by the brokers, but everything changed once we were boarded the boat. The boat was operated by some non-Bengali speaking people who were very rude. Some of them were carrying steel rods with which they hit indiscriminately if anybody made a sound. I got so frightened and couldn't talk."*

The duration of the journey on the sea vary. One survivor mentioned they reached in a jungle of Thailand after 16 days, another one said his boat took 20 days while the other one told they needed 25 days. All of the survivors mentioned they had experienced the most horrified time of their life on the boat. They were given very little food and water once in a day. They had no room to move. Many of them got sick and remained unconscious.

"I saw many people got sick. They were taken away by the brokers and I didn't see them later. I don't know what happened to them in the middle of the sea", one survivor said.

The survivors mentioned they found many Burmese people on the boat who travelled with them for the same purpose.

WHAT HAPPENED?

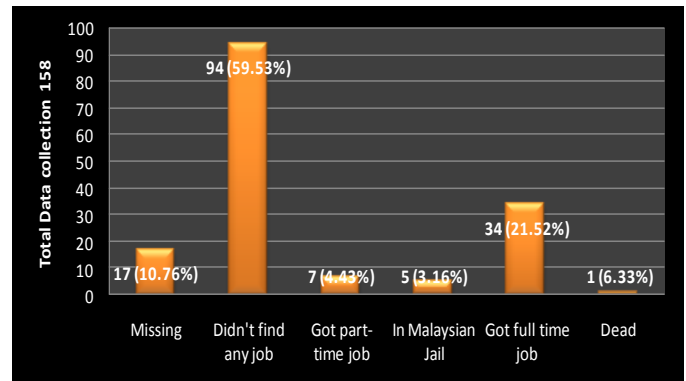
The most terrible part of this journey starts after landing in the Jungle in Thailand. The people are forced to walk several miles in the jungle dividing into small groups. They are kept in the jungle inhumanly with no or little food. Every person is forced to call home and ask the family to pay the money as directed by the agent. The people are bitten brutally until the family pays the money. The amount of the money varies broker to broker. The minimum amount given by the surveyed people is BDT 170,000 (US\$ 2,200 aprox.) and the maximum amount is BDT 280,000 (US\$ 3,500 aprox.)

Once the payment is made by the family, the person is moved to another group who are supposed to cross the border. There is no guarantee that the broker must reach them in Malaysia and find them a job even if the money is paid. Sometimes, the brokers

drop the migrants in the border between Malaysia and Thailand; sometimes they discard the migrants in a situation of being caught by the Border guards. In some cases, the broker collects the money upon arrival in Malaysia but they follow the same brutal actions on the migrants to collect the money.

Amongst 158 respondent families, the study found 10.76% people are missing. This means the migrants have yet to contact with the family after they boarded around six month back.

One respondent family confirmed a death of a member during the journey, while 3.16% are detained in different jails in Malaysian. Amongst those who arrived in Malaysia, 59.53% have been going through hard realities since they didn't able to manage either any job or a document. They are surviving only because relatives and fellow migrants in Malaysia are supporting them.



21.52% have got full-time job and been working without major problem under the shelter of their close relatives. 4.43% have part-time job through which they are trying to survive. But none of them got any legal document. They are living in a state of uncertainty. They can get caught by the police any time and can be detained.

My son, Ibrahim (22) left the house on September 24, 2013 with one of the local brokers. After that he has no trace till now (April 7, 2014). When we asked the local broker, he cannot provide correct information. Once he told my son had been detained in Thailand, but the other time he mentioned other places. I don't know what happened to his fate. How can I get back my son!! Fatema, BailarKandi, Araihasar, Narayangonj.

"...After nine days in the jungle when the money was paid I was carried by a van with a small group. We were dropped in the middle of the jungle and asked to wait. We had been waiting and waiting but nobody came. We got frightened and started to walk in the jungle. After almost two days we saw a big road. We tried to draw attention to assist us but nobody stopped cars. All of a sudden, a van came to us and asked if we were Bengali. They took us in the van as soon as we nodded our heads. They brought us to the camp, gave us food, by the time we understood that we are caught. After hearing in the court, I was given four month jail. After that I was moved to a camp. During my stay in the camp, I managed to inform my family and been able to return back home on March 2014 paying the return ticket." Yeakub, a survivor from Narsingdi district

".....after three hours of drive in a van from the Jungle we crossed the border and reached in Penang city. The broker took us in a house and locked us in different rooms. They gave mobile phone and asked to call the family for money. They beat brutally if somebody refused to talk to the family. There is no mercy until the money is paid. I got released and came out of the room once the money was paid. But I had to face cruel realities because my family took some time to arrange the money. I managed to reach to my cousin in KL. He helped me to get a job and I was fine with that. One evening while I was returning from work, police asked my passport and the work permit. I had nothing, so I got caught and was sent to the jail. After one month imprisonment I was sent to a camp from where I returned back giving the flight ticket." Jibon, a survivor from Arahazar, Narayangonj

RESPONSE TO THE SITUATION

Despite maintaining very clandestine nature, such human smuggling brought up in both the national and international media since 2006 and 2007. It is assumed, on average 5,000 people smuggled annually through the route. Unfortunately, no specific response had been taken by the concerned authority in Bangladesh to stop it. According to the media reports, Bangladesh law enforcement agencies have intensified raids at some departure points since October 2007. The reality is that the passengers are caught during the raids - not the smugglers and/or the brokers themselves. If the smugglers/ brokers are arrested get released soon. There is no single case that shows a single broker/ smuggler gets punished during the last couple of years.

The study found 46% of people left their home without informing the family. The situation made a huge concern among the families in the said research areas. Many families had been forced to sell the small piece of the homesteads to pay the broker's fee to get released their beloved ones. More and more such incidents are taking place that might cause social disorder in coming days. However, the local authority is reluctant to take any initiative to hold the identified brokers in the villages.

The concerned ministry has yet to take any drastic

action to hold the unscrupulous brokers; they even have no awareness campaign to stop people from such perilous migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government and the concern ministry must consider "such attempt of migration" as a serious issue and take immediate action to bring the smugglers' racket under the law. The present "Overseas Employment and Migrants' Law 2013" has provisions to take legal actions against the unscrupulous agents and human traffickers. Under the law, the ministry itself must take initiative to make exemplary punishment against the traffickers. On the other hand, the Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012 also has rigorous punishment for the human traffickers.

The concerned ministry must allocate necessary budget and undertake massive awareness campaigns to stop such irregular migration and promote safe and informed migration. Despite great contribution to the GDP, unfortunately, the labour migrants do not get priority in the national budget.

The media should come up and join hands with the government and the migrants' associations to undertake awareness campaigns out of their corporate social responsibility. Because only appropriate awareness can stop people from taking such perilous attempts.

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