

**For immediate release**

**PRESS RELEASE:**

**Bangladesh Intercepts boat, Rohingya refugees reportedly taken to Bhashan Char island**

*BANGKOK, 08 May 2020:* The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is concerned about reports that a number of Rohingya refugees have been intercepted at sea by Bangladesh authorities and are being transported to Bhashan Char island. The interception reportedly occurred the morning of 07 May 2020, in the vicinity of Saint Martin's Island, some 70km south of Teknaf, in southern Bangladesh.

Sources in Dhaka have reportedly confirmed the arrival of the boat, found adrift, and suggest the passengers are in the process of being transferred to Bhashan Char Island for purposes of quarantine. This action is in line with the recent transfer of 29 Rohingya asylum seekers to Bhashan Char less than one week ago, after the boat on which they were travelling was refused access to Malaysia on 22 May, and subsequently floated adrift for weeks. This transfer represented the first movement of refugees to the remote, uninhabited island.

"Bangladesh should be commended for saving the lives of the families at sea, and for its ongoing efforts to protect Rohingya populations" APRRN Secretary General, Themba Lewis, stated, "but we remain concerned that Bhashan Char is not suitable for hosting refugees. Infrastructure is lacking, medical care is not readily available, and basic systems of support are not in place. If the population rescued today are in fact asylum seekers, they must be provided the basic protection afforded them under international law, including access to asylum procedures and the UNHCR, who currently do not have access to populations held on the island. Covid-19 must not be used as a justification to further risk lives, particularly as monsoon season approaches the cyclone-prone island."

Refugee advocacy groups remain concerned that the transfer of recent boat arrivals to Bhashan Char may represent a shift in refugee hosting by the Bangladesh authorities, which further isolates refugee populations from fundamental rights of freedom of movement, access to livelihoods, and access to protection. In addition, concerns persist regarding the safety of the island itself, located over 10km from the nearest shoreline, without regular transport available or basic support structures in place. These groups also underscore concerns regarding the effective 'arbitrary detention' of populations sent to the island and the apparent involuntary nature of transfer to the facility there.

Regional advocates [stress the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated regional response](#) to asylum seekers fleeing Myanmar in order to ensure refugees at sea are provided life-saving access to asylum and that no more lives are lost, while demonstrating a solidarity in hosting and supporting refugees. APRRN members have called on Australia and Indonesia as Co-Chairs of the Bali Process to utilise the Consultation Mechanism to immediately convene meetings to develop a collective response to refugee flows, and have called upon ASEAN to step into a regional leadership role.

Advocates have simultaneously called to progress solutions to the root causes that lead to the forced displacement of Rohingya, particularly continued violence against Rohingya and other minority populations.

*The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is a network of over 439 civil society organisations and individuals from 29 countries committed to advancing the rights of refugees in the Asia Pacific region. APRRN aims to advance the rights of refugees and other people in need of protection through joint advocacy, capacity strengthening, resource sharing and outreach.*

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