



MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Research Findings on Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants First Edition | March 2024

This document is the offline version of the UNODC Observatory StoryMap on Smuggling of Migrants in Southeast Asia. The full research study, including interactive and static maps, 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 responses to combat the crime of smuggling of migrants and to protect the rights of smuggled migrants.

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Introduction

Migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia is determined by three key trends. The first is the confluence of: aspirations for migration in countries of origin, such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Cambodia; demand for low-wage labour in countries of destination like Thailand and Malaysia; and limited and expensive legal channels for safe and regular labour immigration to match up these needs. The second is the existence of substantial populations in the region, particularly people from Myanmar, in situations of forced displacement and/or statelessness, who are seeking international protection and have limited legal channels to do so. The third is the prevalence of corruption among certain public officials in countries of origin, transit and destination, which acts as a driver and enabler of migrant smuggling, as well as contributing to impunity for perpetrators.

These trends characterize the features of migrant smuggling in the region, driving demand for migrant smuggling among migrants and refugees and leading them to seek out smugglers in person and by phone (rarely on social media) to request their services, rather than smugglers actively recruiting clients.

Because of the lack of regular channels for labour migration, employers are frequently involved in organizing smuggling for prospective employees, with serious consequences for those employees' vulnerability to forced labour, human trafficking and other abuses.

Refugees from countries like Myanmar (particularly Rohingya people), Afghanistan and Somalia often lack travel and identity documents. They face a lack of prospects for stability, safety and economic and educational opportunities in their countries of origin or in countries of first displacement (e.g., Bangladesh, I.R. Iran, Ethiopia). Climate-related factors also exacerbate the situation. Therefore, smugglers may be their only option, or the least bad option, to achieve a sustainable solution and be granted international protection. The link between smuggling and labour migration is, furthermore, also relevant for refugees, who commonly seek opportunities for income generation in low-wage sectors.

So the smuggling industry fills a market niche to supply the demand for mobility outside of regular channels, for a profit, in a region with a vast and diverse geography. Smugglers transport people across long and remote land borders on various different types of vehicles, as well as on foot, and on multiple smaller and larger vessels across the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, the Gulf of Thailand, and between Malaysia and the many islands of Indonesia. Smugglers from countries of origin outside the region collaborate with smugglers in the region to organize smuggling by air, using forged and fraudulent documents.

Smuggling of migrants is made possible in Southeast Asia, as in other world regions, by corrupt practices. Public officials share in smuggling profits; are bribed to ensure compliance; and obstruct criminal investigations. But corruption also acts as a driver of demand for smuggling, as migrants and refugees perceive that they need smugglers to manage requests for bribery and other abuses by public officials during the journey.

Actors in the smuggling industry range from multi-service brokers, employers and smuggling organizations offering full travel packages, to lower-level actors operating only at individual border crossing points.

While smuggled migrants and refugees are vulnerable to victimization by other crime groups active in the region in crimes such as drug trafficking and human trafficking, the research did not indicate that smuggling actors are linked to these groups.

Individual smuggling fees, ranging from 100s to 1,000s of US dollars, are rarely traceable as they are received mostly in cash or through informal money transfer systems.

Smuggling of Migrants and Related Offences

Smuggling of Migrants: the procurement of the illegal entry of a person into a state, in order to obtain a financial or other material benefit (**art. 3, Smuggling of Migrants Protocol**).

Smuggling-Related Offences: document fraud for the purposes of enabling smuggling of migrants, for a financial or other material benefit; and enabling a person to irregularly remain in a state, for a financial or other material benefit (**art. 6, Smuggling of Migrants Protocol**).

Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are important origin and destination countries for smuggling of migrants within and outside Southeast Asia, and key transit hubs for smuggling in the region and globally.¹ The UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants carried out quantitative and qualitative field research during 2022-2023 on migrant smuggling from, through and to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, in partnership with the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) (for more details, see section 7 – Methodology below).

This StoryMap analyses smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air within Southeast Asia, with a focus on Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) and Viet Nam as major origin countries; and from outside the region: Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Somalia. The analysis sets out key findings on migrant smuggling routes, drivers of smuggling, smugglers and their *modi operandi*, smuggling fees and abuses perpetrated against smuggled people. The full version of the StoryMap, including interactive maps and case studies of smuggled people interviewed for this research, is available online at: www.unodc.org/unodc/es/data-and-analysis/som-observatory.html.

Special Points of Interest on Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia

1. **Tens of thousands of people** from Myanmar, from other parts of Southeast Asia and from outside the region are smuggled to, through and from Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand every year.
2. Of 4,785 migrants and refugees surveyed in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand for this research, **83% said they were smuggled.**
3. **Demand for migrant smuggling** among refugees and migrants is driven by a perception of lack of opportunities for regular migration in contexts of:
 - conflict, violence and persecution;
 - statelessness and lack of travel and identity documents;
 - limited access to regular migration channels to apply for international protection and for labour migration; and
 - corruption.
4. People also reported that they approached smugglers because they think **smuggling will be easier than regular migration or independent irregular migration.**
5. Among smuggled people surveyed, **almost half (48%) stated that they would have taken the journey anyway, knowing what they did now about the conditions**, 40% said that they would not have and 12% were undecided.
6. **Corruption is a major enabler of migrant smuggling.** One in four smuggled people surveyed had to give officials a gift, money or a favour in exchange for a service. Corruption in this context mainly consists of:
 - a) collusion between smugglers and corrupt officials; and
 - b) payments of bribes to corrupt officials by smugglers or smuggled people.
7. **Corruption is also a driver of demand for smuggling**, as smuggled people perceive – whether accurately or not – that they need smugglers and brokers to deal with state authorities, because of corruption. Twenty-eight percent of smuggled people surveyed for this research reported that **smugglers assisted them in dealing with authorities.**
8. **Climate-related issues influenced the decision to migrate** for one in four smuggled people surveyed and are particularly relevant for smuggled Bangladeshis.
9. Smuggled people surveyed generally interacted with smugglers they perceived as **individual actors (65%) or loosely structured groups (13%).** The research also found **indications of higher levels of smuggler organization** (perceived by 8% of smuggled people surveyed), particularly among smugglers operating from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Malaysia and Indonesia.
10. In most cases, **the person to be smuggled or their family and friends initiate contact with smugglers (69%).** Smugglers actively approached people intending to migrate in less than one-third of cases (31%).

11. **Three percent of smuggled people surveyed said they felt pressured by smugglers** to use their services.
12. **Social media is rarely the first point of contact with smugglers.** Eighty-seven per cent of people seeking smuggling services contacted the smuggler by phone or in person, and only 13% *via* social media.
13. Rohingya people who are already displaced in Bangladesh are **smuggled by sea directly to Malaysia or are first smuggled by sea back to Myanmar, for onward smuggling by sea or land to Malaysia.** Bangladeshis are sometimes smuggled to Malaysia along the **same routes as Rohingya people.**
14. Migrant smuggling **from outside Southeast Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Somalia) usually begins by air on commercial carriers and generally involves forged or fraudulent travel and/or identity documents.** Almost one third of smuggled people surveyed were provided with forged or fraudulent travel or identity documents by smugglers.
15. Though a wide range of fees was cited (from US\$19 to \$6,650), smuggled people surveyed paid **an average of the equivalent of \$2,380 in smuggling fees,** in cash, by bank transfer and, in the case of some Afghans, partly through *hawala*.
16. Smuggled migrants and refugees surveyed perceive **military and police, smugglers, and to a lesser extent border guards and criminal gangs, as likely to perpetrate abuses** during the journey. These include: physical violence; asking for bribes; extortion; unlawful killing; and sexual violence. Three out of four smuggled people surveyed experienced some form of abuse during their journeys. This is particularly prevalent among Somalis, Cambodians and people from Myanmar.
17. People smuggled to, within, and from Southeast Asia are subjected to **forced labour and trafficking for forced labour, perpetrated by smugglers and by employers with or without connections to the smugglers.** When smuggling is linked to the brokering of jobs, as is often the case for Rohingya and Chin people from Myanmar, as well as for Indonesians, Cambodians and Laotians, risks of debt bondage and trafficking are high.

1. Context

Migration in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a diverse and dynamic region that has shown remarkable rates of economic development and growth in recent years. With a population of over 681 million,² the people of Southeast Asia have become more mobile. 23.6 million people from the region live outside their countries of birth; around a third of them in other countries within the region.³

The most important countries of origin for migration **within the region** are: Myanmar, with 2.2 million people from that country living in other Southeast Asian countries (57% male/43% female); Indonesia with 1.4 million (60% male/40% female); and Malaysia with 1.2 million (56% female/44% male).⁴ Considering migration **from Southeast Asian countries to all global regions**, the Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar have the largest numbers of people residing abroad.⁵

Some Southeast Asian countries are also important **destinations for international migration** - as of 2020, 10.6 million international migrants live in the region. The **majority are from other parts of Southeast Asia and from South Asia**.⁶ Thailand hosts the highest number of migrants from other Southeast Asian countries – 3.5 million (50.4% female/49.6% male), followed by Malaysia with 1.9 million (63% male/37% female) and Singapore with 1.3 million (59% female/41% male).⁷ Many migrant workers in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore work regularly or irregularly in low-wage sectors like agriculture, tourism, construction and domestic work.⁸

Among the three countries where field research was conducted, Malaysia has the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) *per capita* as of 2022 (US\$33,525), followed by Thailand (\$20,679). The countries in the region that are predominantly countries of origin have significantly lower GDP *per capita*, PPP: Indonesia's is \$14,658; Viet Nam \$13,461; Lao PDR \$9,387; Cambodia \$5,355; and Myanmar \$5,020.⁹

Southeast Asian countries also host over three million forcibly displaced and stateless people. As of late 2023, around **789,100 refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people** are recorded as residing in Thailand (595,000), Malaysia (181,000) and Indonesia (13,100), the majority of them from Myanmar.¹⁰ They are mostly Rohingya, but also people of Chin, Karen, Karenni, Shan and Bamar ethnicities, as well as Afghans and Somalis.¹¹ As set out in section 3 - Drivers of Smuggling below, there are few options for forcibly displaced and stateless people to travel regularly to Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Research approach

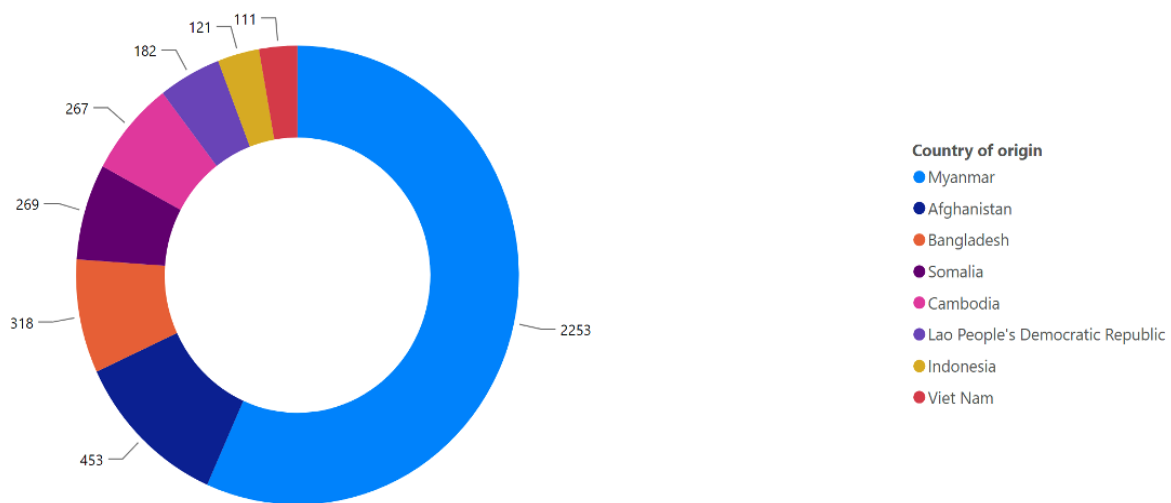
While many people on the move in the region use regular channels, others travel irregularly, often using migrant smugglers. This analysis focuses on **migrant smuggling in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand**, which, given their population size (together they account for over half of the entire population of Southeast Asia), economic relevance and geographical locations, are three key countries for smuggling of migrants in the region.¹²

Administrative data on smuggling of migrants are not systematically collected and analysed in Southeast Asia and limited research has been carried out on migrant smuggling. The lack of an evidence base to guide counter-smuggling responses hampers efforts to prevent and combat migrant smuggling and to protect the human rights of smuggled people, as well as to promote cooperation between States on combating this crime, in line with the UN Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (Smuggling of Migrants Protocol).

4,785 migrants and refugees from Myanmar, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Somalia, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Lao PDR and Pakistan were surveyed in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (referred to as “**survey respondents**” throughout, see interactive chart below). They comprise 2,903 men and 1,882 women.

The vast majority of respondents had arrived in the country of survey since 2021. A minority of respondents from each country of origin arrived in 2020. The exception are Afghans (12% arrived in 2017-2018; 50% in 2019; 12% in 2020; and 26% since 2021) and Somalis (49% arrived in 2019; 25% in 2020; 26% since 2021).

Country of Origin of Smuggled People Surveyed in Southeast Asia



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data. Note that this reflects Observatory's sampling strategy for identifying survey respondents, and not the actual composition of smuggled migrants and refugees in the region.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. Additional efforts were made to survey women, in order to better understand their experiences of migrant smuggling. See section 7 - Methodology for more details.

An additional 60 migrants and refugees participated in in-depth qualitative interviews (“**interviewees**”) in the three countries and 34 **key informants** were interviewed (see section 7 - Methodology below). The Observatory analysed and triangulated the field research findings with data and research from national authorities, international and regional organizations, and academic research.

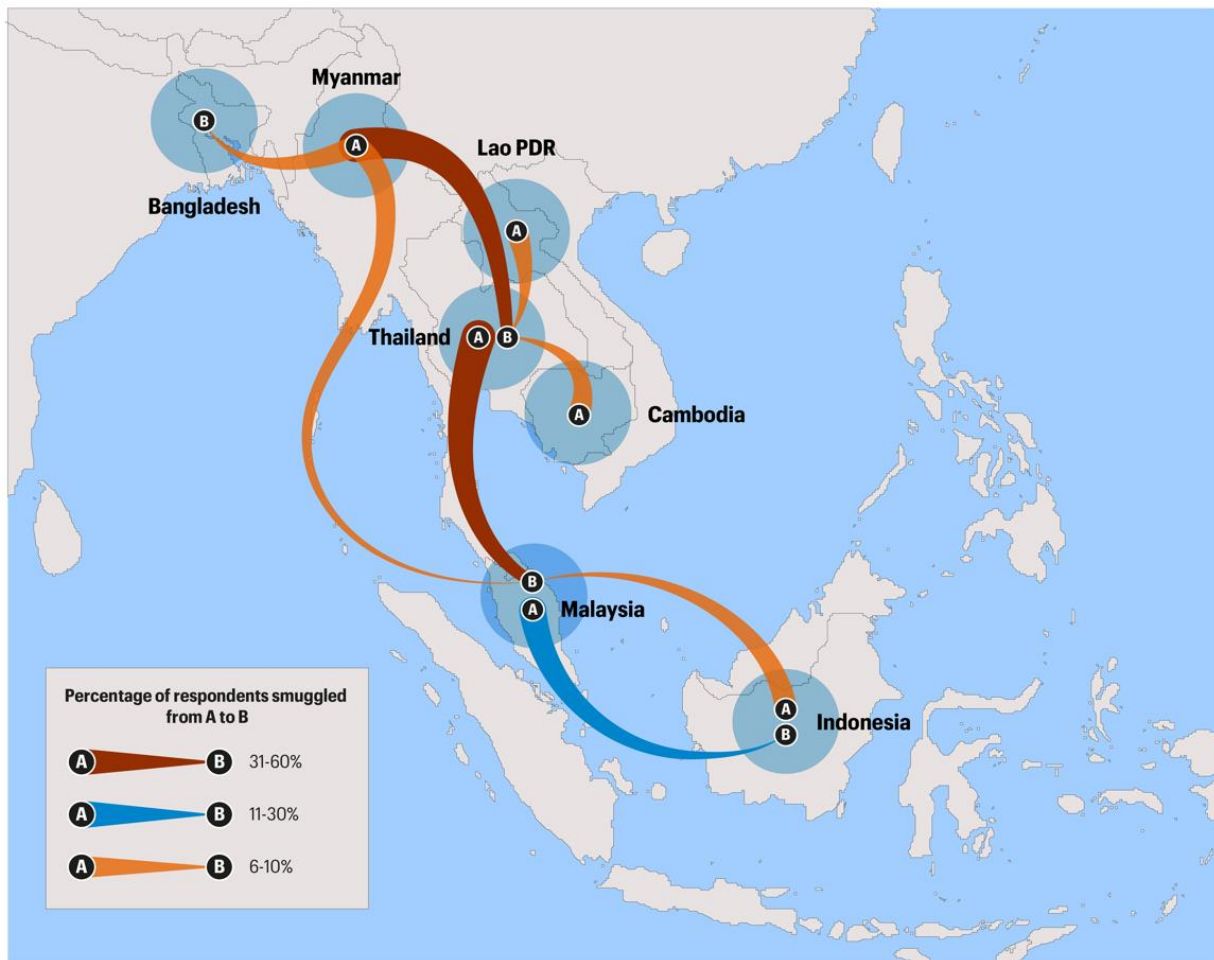
This study presents findings on diverse groups of people smuggled by land, sea and air along various routes through different geographies. It analyses migrant smuggling:

1. **from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Malaysia** (and, to a lesser extent, to Thailand and Indonesia);
2. **within Southeast Asia** (from Indonesia to Malaysia and from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Viet Nam to Thailand); and
3. from **outside the region** - Afghanistan and Somalia to Southeast Asia.

2. Migrant Smuggling Routes

The Southeast Asia region borders East Asia to the north, South Asia and the Bay of Bengal to the west, Oceania and the Pacific Ocean to the east, and Australia and the Indian Ocean to the south. For this research, 4,785 people from Southeast Asian countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam), South Asia (Bangladesh and Pakistan), Afghanistan and Somalia were surveyed in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand during 2022-2023. Of these, **3,977 people (83%) stated that they were smuggled by land, sea and/or air**, while the other 17% travelled independently. The international borders they stated that they were smuggled across within the region are represented below.

Border Crossings of Smuggled People Surveyed



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data.

Note: N=2,846 people surveyed who used smugglers to cross international borders. Borders mentioned by less than 5% of people who used smugglers are excluded. Borders outside the region (e.g. from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia) are excluded. *The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.*

Smuggling from Myanmar and Bangladesh

Myanmar is an important country of origin for smuggled people in the region. The immigration and border control policies of the countries of transit and destination have a significant impact on routes used from Myanmar and on destinations reached. Smuggling incidence and routes are also determined by decades of insecurity in different states in Myanmar, exacerbated by the military takeover in early 2021 and armed insurgencies in response to the takeover.¹³ UNHCR estimates that over 123,000 refugees have fled Myanmar since February 2021 to India, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.¹⁴

People from Myanmar are generally smuggled along different routes and to different destinations, depending on their state of origin in Myanmar.

- People of Rohingya ethnicity from Rakhine State on the coast of western Myanmar are mainly smuggled to Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand and India.¹⁵
- People of Rakhine ethnicity, also from Rakhine State, are smuggled to Bangladesh.
- Chin people from western Myanmar are smuggled to India, Malaysia and Thailand.¹⁶
- Karen/Kayin people from southern Myanmar are smuggled to neighbouring Thailand.¹⁷
- Tai/Shan people from eastern Myanmar and people from the majority Bamar group in Myanmar are also smuggled to Thailand.
- Kokang people from eastern Myanmar are smuggled to China.¹⁸

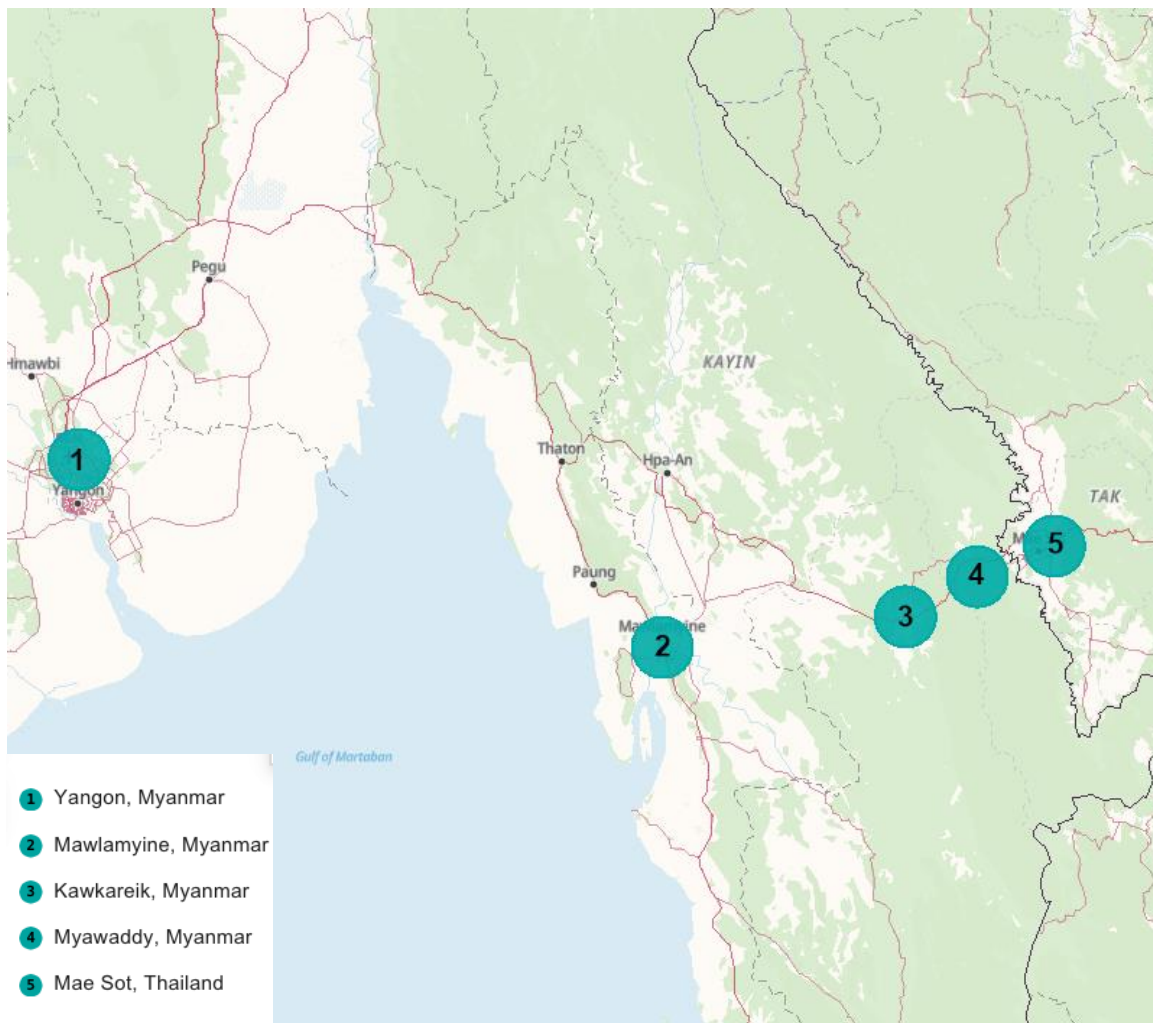
Rohingya people are an ethnic minority group in Myanmar who are stateless because the Government of Myanmar does not grant them citizenship. They have been fleeing violence and discrimination in Myanmar for decades, especially to Bangladesh. The most recent large-scale cross-border displacement of Rohingya was in mid-2017, when over 742,000 mostly Rohingya people fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh due to violent persecution.¹⁹

Almost one million people from Myanmar are currently displaced in Bangladesh.²⁰ They mostly reside in overcrowded refugee camps in southeast Bangladesh, with the largest, Kutupalong-Balukhali expansion site in Cox's Bazar in Chattogram, hosting around 636,000 people.²¹

Since the mid-2010s, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people have been smuggled by sea from Rakhine State in Myanmar, and from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, to Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.²² The vast majority - **89% - of Rohingya people surveyed for this research stated that they used a smuggler** to travel to Malaysia, Thailand or Indonesia.

From Myanmar to Thailand, not all irregular migration involves smuggling. Some people cross the Myanmar-Thailand land border irregularly and independently. Others use smugglers operating on both sides of the border. An important departure route for smuggling, presented in the map below, is from south-central and southeastern Myanmar, via Yangon (1) and Mawlamyine (2). According to smuggled people from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand, the route then passes through Kawkareik (3) and Myawaddy (4) in southeast Myanmar, and then continues by boat across the river Thaungyin/Moei to the city of Mae Sot (5) in western Thailand.

Migrant Smuggling by Land from Myanmar to Thailand I.



Source: UNMAPS.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

North of Mawlamyine, people are also smuggled into Thailand across the Thanlwin/Salween and Thaungyin/Moei rivers by local Myanmar and Thai fishers.

In southern Myanmar, the land is covered by thick jungle and the Myanmar-Thailand border is far more difficult to cross, though some people are smuggled across the Three Pagoda Pass (south of Mawlamyine) into Kanchanaburi in western Thailand. Further south along the Andaman Sea coast, smaller numbers of people are smuggled overland from the southernmost point of Myanmar into Ranong province in southern Thailand. Overland migration and smuggling routes also lead along main roads, smaller roads and through jungles and rough terrain from Tachileik in eastern Myanmar to Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, and from southeast Myanmar to Mae Hong Son in northwest Thailand. ²³

Migrant Smuggling by Land from Myanmar to Thailand II.



Source: UNMAPS.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Rohingya people previously residing in Bangladesh, and interviewed for this research in Thailand, were **first taken by sea from Bangladesh to a seaport in western Myanmar, for onward smuggling from there by sea or by land to Thailand**. Many Rohingya are then smuggled onwards from Thailand to Malaysia, with a smaller number remaining in Thailand. The sea journey from southeast Bangladesh (Teknaf or Anwara in Chattogram) to Thailand usually takes around 5-10 days, though some smuggled people may first spend up to two months at sea, waiting for additional passengers to board the vessel.²⁴

Rohingya and Chin people are **smuggled from Myanmar to Thailand by sea or land, and then into Peninsular Malaysia overland and across rivers**, according to key informants interviewed for this research. Previous research carried out in various locations in Malaysia in 2021-2022 found that 99% of Rohingya people surveyed had transited through another country to get to Malaysia, mainly Thailand, but also Bangladesh and Indonesia.²⁵ They are often smuggled on foot through jungle terrain in southern Thailand and into Malaysia.

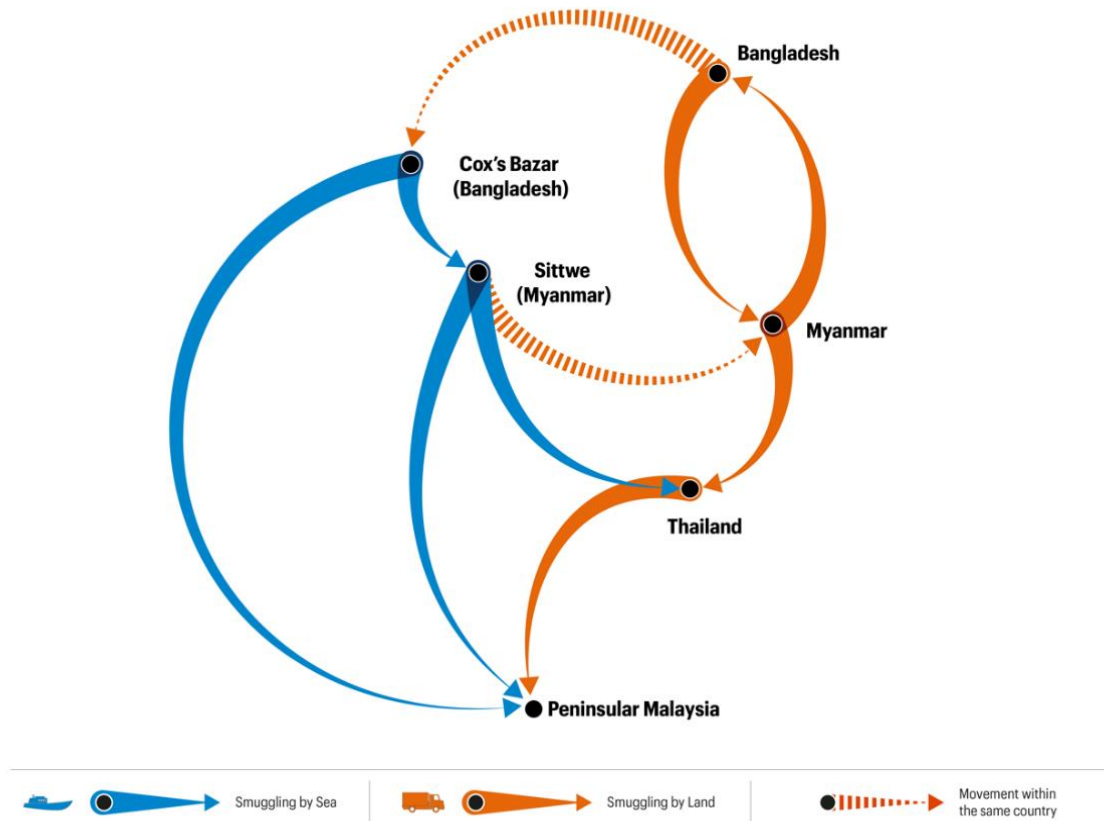
UNHCR records **8,196 Rohingya refugees attempting sea journeys** during 2022-2023, most of them smuggled, on an estimated 82 boats. 917 of them were reported dead or missing. Thirty per cent are children; 28% are women and 42% are men. Forty-nine per cent departed from Bangladesh and 39% from Myanmar (for 12% the departure country is unknown). They were disembarked in Indonesia (47%) or Malaysia (9%). The remainder were intercepted and returned to Myanmar (31%) or Bangladesh (8%).²⁶ This marks a **significant increase** compared to the period 2020-2021, during which 3,176 Rohingyas attempted sea journeys.²⁷

Late 2023, like late 2022, saw an increase in the number of Rohingyas smuggled by sea compared to the rest of the year, as well as in the number of people reported dead or missing. During late 2023, most Rohingyas were smuggled **from Bangladesh to Indonesia**, comprising significantly higher numbers of children. During the last three months of 2023, 2,708 Rohingya people embarked on 20 boats, comprising 43% children, 31% women and 26% men. Ninety-five per cent departed from Bangladesh and 5% from Myanmar, and 78% disembarked in Indonesia. 362 people were reported dead or missing; 10% were intercepted at sea and returned to Myanmar; and 9% were intercepted and returned to Bangladesh.²⁸

There are indications from reports by the Indonesian Government, international organizations and the media in late 2023 that **the numbers of Rohingya people smuggled to Indonesia, particularly from camps in Bangladesh, is continuing to increase**. During November-December 2023, 1,578 Rohingya people arrived in Aceh, Indonesia, by sea, 76% of whom are women or children.²⁹

Due to their statelessness, as well as ongoing violence and persecution,³⁰ travelling by land within Myanmar to seaports where vessels depart for Malaysia can be difficult for Rohingya people. They may therefore be smuggled along quite a **circuitous route** from Myanmar to Malaysia. Some are first smuggled north overland to Bangladesh, and then within Bangladesh to a seaport, in order to sail from there back to a seaport in Myanmar, such as Sittwe.³¹ They are then smuggled southwards by sea from there to Malaysia. Rohingya people already displaced in Bangladesh also travel directly by sea from Cox's Bazar and other parts of Bangladesh to Peninsular Malaysia. Rohingya people smuggled to Malaysia therefore use some combination of the different land and sea smuggling routes represented in the infographic below.

Sea and Land Routes for Smuggling of Rohingya to Thailand and Malaysia



Source: Surveys, migrant interviews, key informant interviews and literature consulted for this research.

Sea routes are used for smuggling directly from Myanmar to Peninsular Malaysia, particularly of **Rohingya people who sail south across the Andaman Sea and enter through the Strait of Malacca** between the Indonesian island of Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia. This is where the Malaysian Coast Guard intercepts the highest numbers of people attempting irregular entry.³² According to key informants, many Rohingya people smuggled by sea enter Malaysia at Port Klang in Kuala Lumpur or Pasir Gudang in Johor, in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia.³³

Bangladeshis are often smuggled to Malaysia along the same sea routes as Rohingya people, from Sittwe in Myanmar or Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. According to key informants in Malaysia, because legal channels for migration of Bangladeshi labour migrants to Malaysia did not always work effectively due to corruption and malpractice,³⁴ Bangladeshis began using the smuggling services and networks already in place for Rohingyas.

A Bangladeshi man travelled by bus from the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka to Cox's Bazar. From Cox's Bazar, he was smuggled by sea and ended up in Indonesia. He was then smuggled from there to Malaysia.

Bangladeshi man interviewed in Malaysia, MY_BGD_HY2

Most Rohingya people smuggled from Bangladesh or Myanmar to Indonesia³⁵ by sea **had intended to arrive in Malaysia**, according to Rohingya interviewees and key informants for this research. People smuggled from Myanmar and Bangladesh by sea commonly arrive in Aceh or Medan in northern Sumatra, Indonesia. According to key informants, some are then smuggled onwards from Indonesia to Malaysia. Other Rohingya people in Indonesia have aspirations to travel onwards to Australia, the USA or Europe,³⁶ though this phenomenon has significantly decreased in recent years.

A Rohingya woman was being smuggled by sea from Maungdaw (Rakhine state, Myanmar, close to the Bangladeshi border) to Malaysia. She and her fellow passengers were abandoned at sea by the smugglers close to the Thai coast, where they were rescued by local fishers and taken to Indonesia.

Rohingya woman interviewed in Indonesia, IND_ROH_SB6



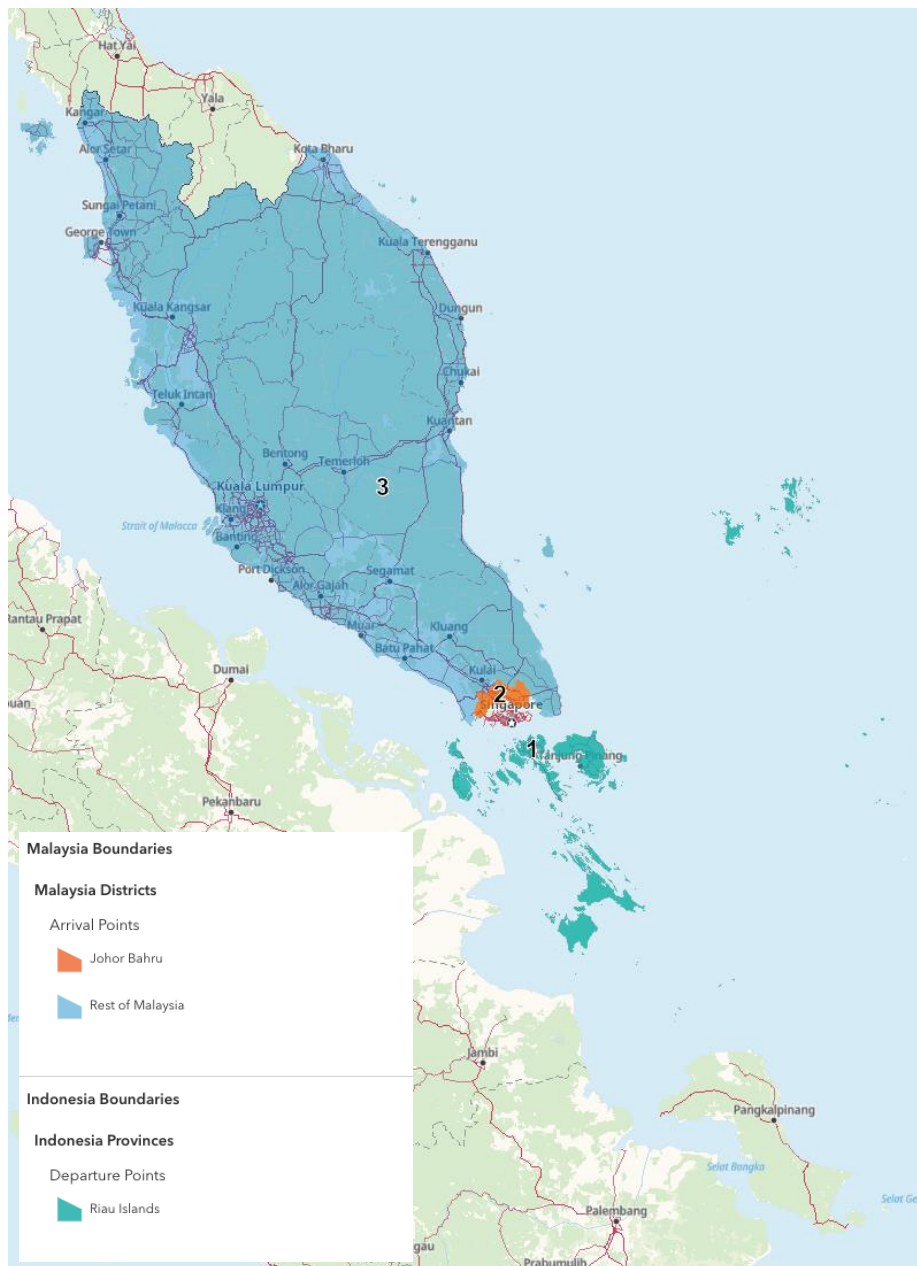
UNODC © Yasser Rezahi

Smuggling from other parts of Southeast Asia

Indonesian citizens can enter Malaysia visa-free and remain for up to thirty days. Nevertheless, some Indonesians enter Malaysia irregularly, avoiding the bureaucracy of regular entry - outside of official border crossing points and/or with fraudulent documents. Some **Indonesians are smuggled by air, sea and land to Malaysia**. Even if they enter regularly, some Indonesians reside and work irregularly in Malaysia, overstaying their 30-day visas. They then use smugglers to make irregular journeys back and forth between Malaysia and Indonesia, *via* Singapore or Thailand. Forty-two percent of Indonesians surveyed for this research in Malaysia stated that they used a smuggler.

Multiple maritime routes and embarkation and disembarkation points connect Indonesia and Malaysia. Batam on the Riau Islands (Indonesia), south of Singapore, is an important departure point for smuggling of Indonesians by speedboat, passenger boat or cargo boat to Johor Bahru in the south of Peninsular Malaysia (see map below).³⁷ This is a relatively short journey that takes 90 minutes by regular ferry.³⁸ At Johor, smugglers and facilitators of internal travel have vehicles waiting for onward transportation by land within Malaysia - lorries or taxis.³⁹ Singapore is also a country of transit, as Indonesians (and other Southeast Asians) do not require a visa to enter.⁴⁰

Migrant Smuggling by Sea from Indonesia to Malaysia



Source: UNMAPS Esri, Michael Bauer Research GmbH 2022, BPS - Statistics Indonesia | Esri, Michael Bauer Research GmbH 2022, Department of Statistics Malaysia.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Indonesians are also smuggled from northern Sumatra by sea to Thailand and then by land to Kedah and Perlis in northwest Malaysia, according to key informants in Malaysia.

An important feature of smuggling routes between Indonesia and Malaysia is that **Indonesians who have overstayed their visas in Malaysia travel irregularly and are smuggled in the reverse direction.** They travel *via* Singapore by air, or from northeast Peninsular Malaysia by land *via* Thailand and from there by air to Indonesia, for personal reasons, and then return to Malaysia to work.⁴¹ Indonesian migrant workers exit through Kelantan in northeast Peninsular Malaysia, at the border with Thailand, near Pengkalan Kubor on the South China Sea coast, or near Rantau Panjang further inland, walking across the river Golok/Ko Lok. Tak Bai in southeast Thailand, close to the Malaysian border, is an entry and departure point by land and by sea.

Cambodia and Thailand share over 800km of land borders and are also well connected by sea and air. Some of the border areas are thick jungles and marshes, making border patrols extremely difficult. Cambodians can enter Thailand visa-free and remain for a maximum of 14 days.⁴² Previous research indicated that the use of brokers and other facilitators to reach Thailand was generally not a common occurrence and smugglers were not usually necessary for Cambodians to enter Thailand.⁴³ However, **almost all Cambodians surveyed in Thailand for this research (96%) stated that they used smugglers to enter Thailand,** largely due to a perception of lack of alternatives (75%).⁴⁴

Cambodian and Thai smugglers on both sides of the border operate along different smuggling routes and with different *modi operandi*.⁴⁵ Smuggling routes lead from the southern and eastern parts of Cambodia northwards *via* the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh and northwest Cambodia to Sa Kaeo in southeast Thailand.⁴⁶

Two Cambodian women were smuggled overland from Oudongk province in central Cambodia, just north of Phnom Penh, to Poi Pet, at the Thai border, through forests and potato fields into Thailand. From there they travelled in a fruit pickup van to the Thai capital Bangkok.

Cambodian women interviewed in Thailand, TH_CAM_SB1; TH_CAM_F101

Cambodians seeking to enter Malaysia also cross through Thailand. They either travel regularly to Thailand and are then smuggled to Malaysia or are smuggled all the way to the destination.⁴⁷

Smugglers operating from Lao PDR into Thailand have cross-border relationships and networks, and speak similar languages. 84% of Laotians interviewed for this research in Thailand stated that they used smugglers. Thai smugglers procure in-country and cross-border transportation and accommodation, and are often also in contact with prospective employers of Laotians in Thailand. Due to the relatively easy terrain to cross, people are smuggled both covertly and overtly, along land and riverine routes.

The most common route is across the Mekong river near the Laotian capital Vientiane in the west of the country to Nong Khai in northeast Thailand. Further south, people cross by land from Muang Champassak (Lao PDR) to Ubon Ratchathani (Thailand).⁴⁸ Three Laotians interviewed for this research described relatively short smuggling journeys - less than one day - across the Mekong into Thailand.

Smuggling from Afghanistan and Somalia

Smuggling to Southeast Asia from other regions is multimodal, involving multiple types of transportation. Individual Afghans and Somalis surveyed and interviewed for this research were smuggled by air, land, sea and river, all in the context of one journey from the country of origin or previous residence to Indonesia, Malaysia or Thailand.

Afghans are smuggled by air *via* India to Malaysia and from there to Indonesia by sea. They generally intend to transit onwards – regularly through refugee resettlement or using smugglers - to Australia or North America. Afghan men interviewed in Indonesia for this research were smuggled by air from Kabul, Afghanistan *via* New Delhi, India to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. From there they were smuggled by air, land or sea to Indonesia.

Afghans with experiences of multimodal smuggling by air, sea and land were also interviewed in Malaysia for this research. Smuggling by air was carried out *via* airports in India and the Gulf States to the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur.⁴⁹

An Afghan man met a smuggler in a city in southwest Afghanistan, close to the border with the Islamic Republic of Iran (I.R. Iran). He and his family travelled from there by foot and on donkeys along the “Raja Route” *via* Chahar Borjak in southwest Afghanistan (Nimruz province), through southwest Pakistan, crossing the border close to Saravan in southeast I.R. Iran. After two days there, they were transported at night in cars *via* Kerman in southern I.R. Iran to the capital Tehran. They spent around six months in Tehran obtaining fraudulent passports and visas and were then smuggled by air *via* Doha (Qatar) to Kuala Lumpur.

Afghan man interviewed in Malaysia, MY_AFG_AB1

Somalis can also be smuggled by air *via* Dubai (United Arab Emirates) to Malaysia and from there by sea to Indonesia. Five Somalis interviewed for this research in Indonesia were smuggled by air from Mogadishu (Somalia) *via* Dubai to Kuala Lumpur. A Somali woman interviewed was smuggled by air from Mogadishu *via* Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Bangkok (Thailand) to Kuala Lumpur. They were all then smuggled by sea from Malaysia to Indonesia.

Indonesia and Malaysia are also transit countries for irregular and smuggled migrants and refugees aspiring to reach Australia, North America or the Middle East.⁵⁰ Many are not successful in reaching these intended destination countries. People from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan, among others, require a visa to enter Malaysia, while Indonesians, Iranians, Iraqis and Somalis, among others, can enter Malaysia for short stays visa-free.⁵¹ People fly regularly or are smuggled to Malaysia, then intend to contact a smuggler to facilitate the journey *via* Indonesia to Australia or other destinations.⁵²

People of other nationalities are also smuggled to and through Southeast Asia, albeit in smaller numbers. Notably, North Koreans are smuggled through China and Lao PDR to Thailand, in order to apply for authorization to enter the Republic of Korea there (estimates of around 1,000-1,200 people per year).⁵³ However, these routes are not covered by this research as no respondents of these nationalities were interviewed or surveyed.

3. Drivers of Smuggling

An overwhelming majority of the migrants and refugees surveyed for this research (**83%**) **stated that they used at least one smuggler** at some point in their journey, with no significant gender differences.⁵⁴

Among Rohingya people surveyed in all three countries, 89% stated that they used a smuggler, while among all survey respondents from Myanmar, 90% used a smuggler. As regards other Southeast Asians, 96% of Cambodians, 84% of Laotians and 60% of Vietnamese surveyed in Thailand used a smuggler, while 42% of Indonesians surveyed in Malaysia used a smuggler. 95% of Somalis surveyed in Indonesia, 93% of Bangladeshis surveyed in Malaysia, and 89% of Afghans surveyed in Indonesia and Malaysia used a smuggler. Pakistanis surveyed in Thailand are the exception – only 2% stated that they used a smuggler. It is notable that a much higher proportion of Pakistanis surveyed (10%) refused to answer this question, compared to people of other nationalities (around 1%).

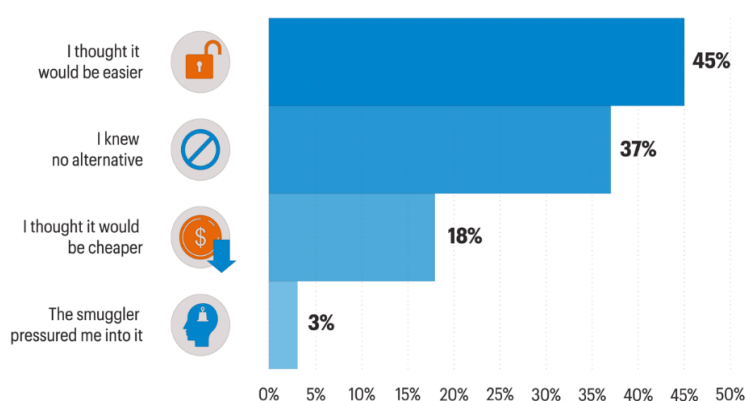
Smuggling of migrants offences are committed when there is a **demand for migration** combined with:

- **lack of options, or perception of lack of options, for regular migration;**
- **obstacles to independent irregular travel;**
- **corrupt practices at borders; and**
- **relative impunity for smugglers.**

Most smuggled people take these obstacles to regular and/or independent travel into account in advance of their journey – 84% of smuggled people surveyed stated that they had planned to use a smuggler before travelling. Sixteen percent had not planned to do so, but ultimately did due to the factors listed above.

Most smuggled people surveyed stated that they used a smuggler because they thought it would be **easier** and/or because they thought they had **no alternative**. Another motivation cited was that they believed it would be cheaper. A small minority (3%) stated that they felt pressured by smugglers at some point to use their services. There was no clear difference between genders and each respondent could choose multiple motivations.

Motivations for Using a Smuggler



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data. Note: N= 3,684 people surveyed who answered this question.

Demand for smuggling of migrants

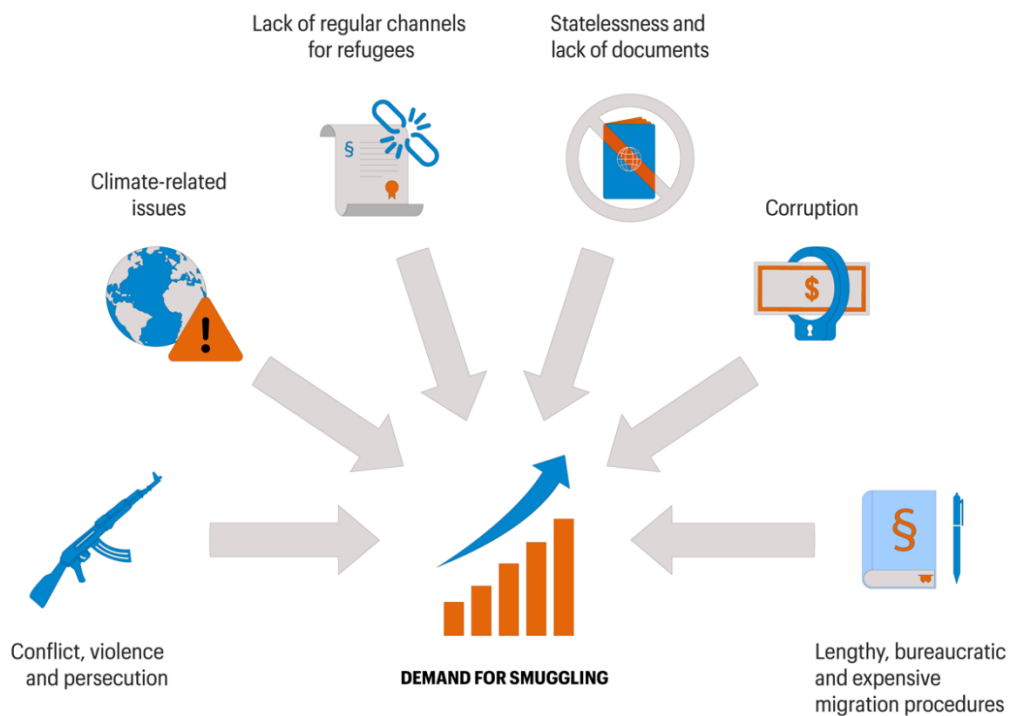
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“Demand is massive in terms of people needing to flee awful circumstances, needing to flee conflict, particularly out of Myanmar and persecution there, that is absolutely rife and growing. And then the lack of legal pathways to get to where they need to go just culminates in a perfect storm for the need for smuggling services.”

Key informant interviewed in Thailand, TH_KI_SB1

Overall, based on the primary and secondary sources analysed for this research, the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants identifies **six main factors that determine demand for migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia**. Some are drivers of migration in general, such as conflict, violence and persecution, and climate-related issues, while other relate specifically to demand for smuggling, such as lack of regular channels, lengthy, bureaucratic and expensive migration procedures, and statelessness and lack of documents. These factors act in combination and are of greater or lesser importance, depending on the origins of the people being smuggled.

Factors Influencing Demand for Using a Smuggler



Source: Surveys, migrant interviews, key informant interviews and literature consulted for this research.

1. Conflict, violence and persecution

Many Rohingyas and others from Myanmar, interviewed in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand for this research, described harassment, persecution and violence by members of the military and police, as well as by private citizens, as the main reasons for leaving Myanmar. One Rohingya woman's house in Sittwe had been burned down and she was placed in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Rakhine State.⁵⁵ A young Rohingya man also cited security concerns, and threats by the Myanmar military to kill him and burn his house down.⁵⁶ A young woman from a town close to Mandalay in central Myanmar left because nearby villages had been burned down.⁵⁷

An overwhelming majority of Rohingya people surveyed in Malaysia for previous research in 2021 cited violence and insecurity (81% of men; 76% of women) and lack of rights and freedom (82% of men; 73% of women) as reasons for leaving Myanmar.⁵⁸ Chin people from Myanmar also leave because of security issues and fear of military killings and abuse; this is also a motivation for using travel facilitators to move internally within Myanmar. These facilitators may then additionally act as smugglers for cross-border travel.⁵⁹

A young Chin woman from Myanmar described how people were recruited for forced labour in Myanmar after the 2021 military takeover, including girls and women forced to be porters for the military. Some girls and women were sexually abused and mistreated by soldiers during these experiences. She was a teenage girl at the time and the interviewee's parents were worried that she would also be recruited, so they instructed her to join her sister in Malaysia.

Chin woman from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia, MY_CHN_HY1

People of other origins also leave because of conflict, insecurity and persecution, including Cambodians, Vietnamese, Afghans and Somalis. Afghans interviewed for this research in Indonesia and Malaysia, some of whom are from the Hazara minority, cited insecurity, fear, discrimination and lack of access to employment and education as reasons for leaving. A young Afghan woman (born in I.R. Iran) interviewed in Malaysia was not able to work or attend university in I.R. Iran or Afghanistan.

For people in a refugee situation, financial difficulties can act as an additional driver for departure and for the use of smugglers. For Rohingyas in particular, lack of opportunities for income generation in the country of first displacement (Bangladesh) is an additional driver. According to key informants interviewed in Australia, Rohingya people displaced in Bangladesh often do not see a future there, and currently have few prospects of regular refugee resettlement elsewhere, driving their use of smugglers.

2. Climate-Related Issues

Among the reasons given for leaving their countries of origin or previous residence, almost one in four (24%) migrants and refugees surveyed for this research stated that **issues related to climate or the natural environment influenced their decision to leave**. The most reported issues were sudden-onset events, like flooding or storms (reported by 58% of respondents who answered yes to the question), unpredictable weather patterns (45%) and drought (45%). Others mentioned slow-onset events like "livestock or crop disease" and/or "extreme temperature".

Climate-related issues are particularly relevant for smuggled Bangladeshis; three out of four Bangladeshis surveyed said that climate-related or natural environment issues influenced their

decision to leave. This was also the case for 69% of Laotians, 65% of Cambodians and 52% of Somalis. Sixteen percent of respondents from Myanmar stated this, and lower percentages of people from other nationalities. Climate change is a factor in migration decision-making – and in some cases, a smuggling driver – that warrants further research.

3. Lack of regular migration channels to apply for international protection

Linked to the previous point on situations of conflict and persecution, in a context where **regular travel is limited or impossible**, refugees and asylum applicants from Myanmar, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Afghanistan and Somalia are **smuggled to the country of refuge**. People of Rohingya, Chin, Karen, Karenni and Kachin ethnicities from Myanmar can rarely access regular refugee resettlement or migration pathways.⁶⁰



“People aren’t necessarily waiting for the Thai military to open [the borders], they want out [of Myanmar], and they may come in through undocumented and irregular ways to find safety and work, which opens them up to corruption and bad employment situations.”

Key informant interviewed in Thailand, TH_KI_SB3

In addition, the possibility of refugee resettlement from countries in the region to third countries outside the region is a factor in the use of smugglers. As resettlement needs far outweigh available places, some Afghan, Somali and Rohingya people interviewed for this research indicated that their choice of destination was influenced by the possibility of being resettled from that country to other destinations.

4. Statelessness and lack of documents

Statelessness contributes to driving displacement and smuggling of Rohingya from Myanmar.⁶¹ Many Rohingya people interviewed for this research specifically pointed to their lack of documents as a reason for using smugglers.

Also for many Chin people from Myanmar, lack of access to travel documents is a key factor in the use of smugglers. A Chin woman interviewed described how she had been planning to travel to Hakha, the capital of Chin State, to apply for a travel document, but services were interrupted due to armed conflict. During the period December 2022 to February 2023, the ruling junta of Myanmar stopped issuing or renewing national passports, and subsequently imposed requirements of tax clearance certificates for passport renewal in late 2023.



“I did not have travel documents. I just came here with the help of the agent [smuggler]. We never applied for documents because the soldiers were everywhere in the country, even at the airport.”

Chin woman from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia, MY_CHN_HY1

Lack of travel and identity documentation also leads Afghans to use smugglers. Two Afghans interviewed in Malaysia mentioned how only the father of the family, in each case, had a passport, but his wife and children did not, so they needed a smuggler. Two other Afghans interviewed in Malaysia also used smugglers because they did not have travel documents.

5. Lengthy, bureaucratic and expensive procedures

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“It’s very bureaucratic to go through the regular route.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY5

When smuggling is perceived as significantly easier to access than regular migration routes, the demand for smuggling is exacerbated. Smuggling may be cheaper than regular labour migration, but even if it is not, people may use smugglers because of difficulties and delays in accessing regular migration channels.⁶² There are regular labour migration pathways for Cambodians to migrate to Thailand, for example, but the bureaucracy is costly and onerous.⁶³

“

Officials from the Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS) described an operation in 2021 to rescue thirty-five Indonesians being smuggled to Malaysia by sea: *“We asked if they were fishermen, and they said, ‘No, we have jobs in Malaysia’. We asked about documents, and no one had documents. We asked about their companies, they said, ‘we don’t know’ who their employers are; they just send money online, no website, we just apply for jobs on WhatsApp.”*

Focus group with key informants in Indonesia, IND_FG_1

Many people are smuggled to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand **because of a perception of high expenses associated with regular migration**, according to key informants. A Bangladeshi woman interviewed in Malaysia, for example, whose intended final destination was Australia, had attempted to travel regularly but found it too expensive.

For Indonesians migrating to Malaysia in particular, smuggling can be cheaper than the total costs associated with regular labour migration or with the status regularization ("recalibration") programme.⁶⁴ A key informant from a Malaysian NGO provided an estimate of around US\$1,000-1,300 for an Indonesian to migrate regularly for work. The average smuggling fee paid by Indonesians surveyed in Malaysia for this research was \$719. However, key informants also stressed that **this perception may persist even if smuggling is actually more expensive.**

Furthermore, regular migration in Southeast Asia does not necessarily guarantee better legal protection or higher net earnings for migrants. Migrants may enter regularly but end up with irregular immigration status because of the actions (or inaction) of their employers.⁶⁵ **High costs can result in people being in a situation of debt bondage** with their employer or recruiter.⁶⁶

Indonesian women have particular difficulty in paying migrant labour recruiters for their services, and difficulty in accessing loans for this purpose, according to a key informant in Malaysia. The Indonesian Government estimates that over two million Indonesian emigrants, the majority women in domestic work, are undocumented. Indonesian women in domestic work abroad, particularly from the province of East Nusa Tenggara, are vulnerable due to lack of financial resources and indebtedness to labour recruiters.⁶⁷

According to the ILO, women in particular “often have little choice but to migrate irregularly, in some cases due to government bans and restrictions on women's mobility in the region”.⁶⁸ The Indonesian Government’s ban on its citizens travelling to Malaysia for work due to reports of abuses, for a few weeks during July 2022 (lifted on 1 August 2022), led to an increase in the smuggling of young Bangladeshi and Indonesian women to Malaysia, according to a key informant in Malaysia, to meet the continuing demand for domestic workers.⁶⁹

People from Indonesia and countries in South Asia are also smuggled into Malaysia because they have been **offered work by employers there who do not have authorization to employ foreign workers**. According to key informants, some Indonesians are informed that their future employers need them to start working immediately and that applying for a permit would take too long, so they use a smuggler. Aspiring Indonesian migrant workers may also not understand the migration procedures in Indonesia and in the country of destination.⁷⁰ Malaysia stopped recruiting workers through recruitment agencies not covered by the G2G programme and put in place regular labour migration systems for Bangladeshis,⁷¹ which do not always function effectively, leading to an increase in the use of smugglers by Bangladeshis in particular.

Other migrants and refugees interviewed refer to the difficulty of obtaining immigration permits. This is often linked to lack of access to the requisite information on the procedures. One Indonesian man interviewed used a smuggler to return to Malaysia a second time after his work permit had expired. He entered on a tourist visa but remained in-country to work. This is a common issue, according to a key informant for this research from an NGO in Malaysia. Stricter immigration processes and requirements put in place by Malaysia, such as certificates and health checks, may become so unwieldy that people migrate irregularly and use smugglers.

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“There is a constant demand for smuggling from people who want to go abroad as quickly as possible. There are layers of checks, authorizations that they must pass through. The Government has a very complicated bureaucracy.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY11

According to a key informant in Bangladesh, many migrant workers have low literacy levels and so **they depend on smugglers to complete their paperwork for labour migration, and may not be aware that they are migrating irregularly and being smuggled.**

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“When I asked [Bangladeshi intending migrants] if they knew that they needed passports to be able to move to Malaysia, they said that no, they did not think about that, as the agents told them if they take the water path, go via sea, they don't need passports. And they trusted those agents.”

Key informant interviewed in Bangladesh, MY_KI_SB3

Other key informants also referred to stricter border controls by border police and military, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it more likely that people use smugglers rather than attempting to cross independently. According to a key informant interviewed in

Thailand, more people have been smuggled there from Myanmar since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Corruption and migrant smuggling

Corruption is a key driver and enabler of smuggling of migrants, as well as being an integral part of the *modus operandi* of migrant smugglers in this region,⁷² as in other regions around the world. Research by the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants since its inception in 2019 has consistently shown that where there is smuggling, there is corruption. Smuggled migrants and refugees from various countries interviewed for this research, and key informants in all the countries covered, referred to the centrality of corrupt practices in facilitating smuggling of migrants.

Previous UNODC research found that corruption is particularly prevalent in Southeast Asia in the contexts of: client identification by smugglers; procurement of forged or fraudulent documents; and border crossings by land, sea and air. Court cases in relation to corruption and migrant smuggling during the period 2013-2020 in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, among other Southeast Asian countries, were compiled for this previous research. The study concluded that “...*human trafficking and migrant smuggling could not occur to the extent that they do across the Bali Process region, without the involvement and complicity of corrupt officials.*”⁷³

One in four smuggled people surveyed for this research had to give officials a bribe (a gift, money or a favour) in addition to an official fee, in order to obtain a service. Of these, 41% stated that the bribe was given to **passport/visa officials**, 38% to **military personnel**, and 28% to **other immigration officials**. This is followed by 26% who bribed **police not at border crossings**, 24% who bribed **police at border crossings** and 18% who bribed accommodation or detention centre staff.

A slightly higher proportion of women reported experiencing corruption than men. Women represent 39% of the survey sample, but 46% of the people who reported being asked for bribes. Requests for bribes by military personnel and by police at borders are reported most frequently by respondents from Myanmar and Cambodia. For example, the smuggler of a young woman from Myanmar assured the group she was travelling with that the military at the checkpoint within Myanmar had been bribed so that the group could pass through.⁷⁴



“If you leave without giving any solid reason, you might get in trouble, even if you have proper documents. The soldiers will question why you are leaving the country. Only people with good connections with the soldiers might be able to leave the country.”

Chin woman from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia, MY_CHN_HY1

According to multiple smuggled people interviewed, as well as key informants, corruption is mainly manifested in **collusion between smugglers and the authorities, and payments of bribes to the authorities by smugglers or smuggled people.**

Twenty-eight per cent of smuggled people surveyed for this research reported that smugglers assisted them in dealing with authorities, particularly Bangladeshis, Indonesians and Cambodians. As set out above, this is a major driver of demand for smuggling, as smuggled people perceive – whether mistakenly or not – that **they need smugglers to deal with state authorities, because of the prevalence of corruption.**

Key informants referred to the prevalence of corruption among certain Thai police officers working along the borders with Myanmar, and at certain police stations. They described police knowledge of regular smuggling boats crossing the Moei/Thaungyin river close to official border crossing points, particularly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with systems of bribery in place.⁷⁵

A Karen man from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand described how he was intercepted by the Thai authorities and deported to Myanmar to be handed over to the Myanmar military. In the interviewee's understanding of the situation, the Myanmar military then handed him and the rest of his group back to the smugglers.⁷⁶ Key informants, as well as an Afghan man and an Indonesian man interviewed, described bribery systems in place at specific immigration counters at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) in Malaysia. According to key informants, some low-level immigration officers at KLIA were arrested for corruption in 2023 and others are under investigation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).⁷⁷

Previous UNODC research identified a number of cases of corruption in migrant smuggling in Malaysia. One 2020 case in Johor involved collusion between public officials and migrant smugglers in relation to Malaysian exit stamps for Indonesian migrants. Charges were pressed against members of the Royal Malaysian Police, the Malaysian Armed Forces, the Marine Police and the Immigration Department.⁷⁸

One Afghan man interviewed was instructed by the smuggler to go to specific immigration counters in Bali (Indonesia).⁷⁹ Another Afghan man, smuggled by air from New Delhi to Bali, described his experience of the flights: *"If you pay a lot of money for the service, you can get through without any issues. Money is important here, we were treated like VIPs"* (IND_AFG_SB7).

Other key informants in Malaysia mentioned the payment of "protection money" by migrant smugglers to law enforcement, and lack of due diligence in approving immigration permits. Corrupt officers collude with smugglers, for example in relation to student visas for Bangladeshis to come to Malaysia for education programmes that did not exist. This includes, according to key informants interviewed in Australia:



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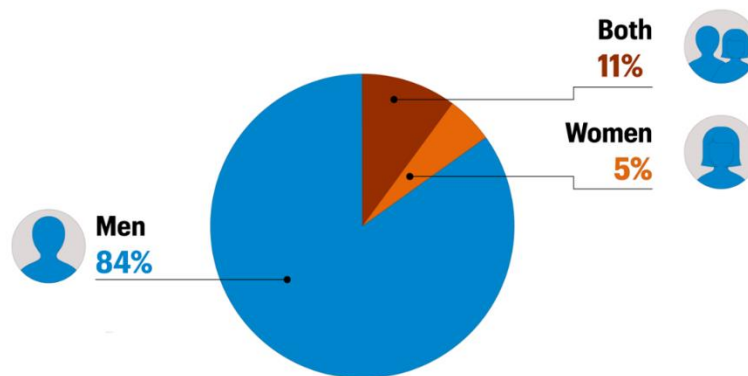
"turning a blind eye to activities or government officials being directly involved in smuggling ventures where they accept bribes" (IND_KI_SB3). Corruption also hinders efforts to prevent and combat smuggling.

4. Smugglers

Who are the smugglers?

Smuggled people surveyed and interviewed said that **most smugglers they had direct contact with were men**. The majority of survey respondents of both sexes stated that their smugglers were all men (84%). Eleven per cent stated that they had smugglers of both sexes, and 5% had only women smugglers, with no significant gender differences in terms of respondents. According to key informants, **women carry out distinct roles**, such as providing accommodation (in the context of enabling irregular stay for the purpose of migrant smuggling), document fraud and identifying smuggling clients.⁸⁰

Sex of Smugglers, as reported by Smuggled People Surveyed



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data. Note: N= 3,684 people surveyed who answered this question.

Eleven per cent of survey respondents mentioned **both men and women acting as their smugglers**. Two Cambodian women interviewed in Thailand were smuggled to Thailand by Cambodian men and women. A young woman from Myanmar used a female smuggling boss, the sister of her cousin's wife, who was living in Thailand, as well as male smuggling drivers and guides. Specifically in the case of smuggling of Indonesian domestic workers to Malaysia, many smugglers are women, according to a key informant.

A Rohingya woman from Myanmar was smuggled with her husband, five children and two grandchildren by: a female smuggling boss; a female smuggler who transported them on a boat across the river Moei/Thaungyin; and a male smuggler who transported them overland to Mae Sot in Thailand.

Rohingya woman from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand, TH_ROH_FI02

Smugglers are generally familiar with the people being smuggled or with the territory covered. The research shows that smugglers are either of the same nationality and/or ethnicity as the people being smuggled or they are from the transit and destination countries

along the respective smuggling routes. Often the smuggling group combines people from both these origins. This finding is substantiated by all of the sources analysed and triangulated for this research.

Smugglers of Rohingya people often recruit them to operate within their networks.⁸¹ For example, a Rohingya woman interviewed in Indonesia described the smuggling group on the ship as men from Myanmar who spoke the Rohingya language, working for a male non-Rohingya captain from Myanmar.

Some smugglers have prior experience of being smuggled themselves. They then use this knowledge to perpetrate smuggling, using connections they have established with associates in countries of origin, transit and destination.⁸² Among smuggled people surveyed, almost one in ten considered the smuggler to be a fellow migrant.

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“For the Rohingya, [smugglers] are quite influential in the community. And they usually run a business. Either they have a restaurant on the roadside, or they may have a learning centre [informal education institution]. And they have been staying in Malaysia for many years. They are well connected. I interviewed these people [smugglers] and asked if they have ever returned to Myanmar since they came to Malaysia. They said, yes, more than five times. [...] They know who these people [in the smuggling network] are, where are the transit points, how is the journey. If it is monsoon season, he knows that maybe it is better to not use sea routes, and that it is better to use land routes. They know about all this. They also have connections back to Bangladesh, and Thailand.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY7

According to key informants, smugglers of Indonesians are also often trusted local figures with experience in facilitating movement, providing sponsors, loaning money and connecting people with smugglers outside the region. Indonesian fishers are involved in the riskiest aspects of smuggling by sea - bringing people to land and organizing clandestine disembarkations.

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“Certainly, with the Chin, smuggling is seen as a service provision. It's a service you pay for, much like a travel agent. With the Rohingya, it's much more seen as these are criminals. Something bad is going to happen. If it doesn't, it's a miracle. But both would see it as a necessity though.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY4

In the Southeast Asian context, smugglers provide a wide array of services to smuggled people, in addition to actual smuggling services. While many of these brokers commit smuggling offences, others are providing regular services. Key informants for this research in the three countries described these dynamics. A study on smuggling of Rohingya to Malaysia found that the *dalal* (Rohingya, Bangla, Hindi and Arabic for broker, intermediary, agent or smuggler) is responsible for arranging all aspects of their travel. A *dalal* can act as labour recruiter, creditor, travel assistant, interpreter and job broker to smuggling clients. Smugglers

may also have strong ties with businesspeople, traders and the tourism industry, as well as import-export related businesses.⁸³ For Indonesians, *tekongs* (agents or smugglers) similarly provide multiple services, including smuggling.

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“In Indonesia, and likely in most places, smugglers are generally seen as service providers who are facilitating migration. While there might be an awareness that their activities are illegal, they are not necessarily perceived as criminal masterminds.”

Key informant interviewed in Indonesia, IND_KI_SB3



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Modus operandi of smugglers

Organization

Smuggled people surveyed generally interacted with **one smuggler** during their journeys. This was the case for 99% of Indonesians, 92% of Laotians, 84% of Afghans, 78% of Cambodians, 73% of Bangladeshis, 70% of people from Myanmar and of Somalis, and 68% of Vietnamese. For the minority who interacted with multiple smugglers, they perceived them as loosely structured or acting independently. However, slightly more people from Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR who interacted with multiple smugglers considered that these smugglers worked together.

Three out of five (61%) had direct contact with one smuggler for either the whole journey or a segment of it. One in four (26%) had **direct contact with more than one smuggler**. Around half of those who used multiple smugglers had the impression that the smugglers were loosely

structured, 30% stated that it seemed to be an organized network, and 15% stated that they appeared to be all independent. Of the 3,977 people surveyed for this research who used smugglers, one in ten (9%) reported that a smuggler had introduced them to other smugglers. These findings should be interpreted with the caveat that smuggled people rarely have a clear understanding of the structures and levels of organization of smugglers and smuggling groups they are in contact with.

A Rohingya woman described using unconnected smugglers for different smuggling modes in different locations. One actor smuggled her overland from Rakhine State in Myanmar to the seaport on Shah Porir Dwip Island (off the coast of Teknaf, Bangladesh). Different actors smuggled her by sea to Indonesia.

Rohingya woman from Myanmar interviewed in Indonesia, IND_ROH_SB6

Other key informants described **individual smugglers working on an informal and *ad hoc* basis**, often active only at specific border crossing points. Individual smugglers may provide transportation across land or sea borders. For example, according to key informants, transporters assist people to cross the Indonesian-Malaysian land border on Borneo Island as “casual work” and part of a regular transportation business. Malaysian and Indonesian fishers engage “part-time” in sea smuggling, as they are familiar with the geography and aware of law enforcement practices.

An Afghan man was smuggled from Kolkata, India, where he had been residing for a year, to Indonesia by sea on a large boat. It took eight days to reach Aceh in northern Sumatra, Indonesia. He was then smuggled to a port in Lampung in South Sumatra by car and from there across to Jakarta by sea. There he contacted an Indonesian smuggler through a fellow Afghan, who told him to travel independently back to Medan in North Sumatra (by boat, taxi and bus). In Medan, he contacted an Afghan smuggler, whose number he had been given by the Indonesian smuggler and who smuggled him by sea to Malaysia.

Afghan man interviewed in Malaysia, MY_AFG_AB3

However, in the experiences of some interviewees for this research, there were **indications of higher levels of smuggler organization**. Referring to smugglers of Rohingya and Chin from Myanmar, Bangladeshis and Somalis, these include perceptions of: groups of smugglers working together as a network; clients paying one smuggling fee to cover services provided by multiple smugglers; and smuggling of larger groups of people.

Different smuggling actors carry out different roles, either in collaboration with each other or independently. Key informants provided indications of a division of roles in the Southeast Asian context, among: bosses/organizers; agents identifying clients; transporters; and, in some cases, employers (see *Job brokering* below). However, there is little evidence of the involvement of structured criminal organizations exercising control over territory in smuggling of migrants along these routes.⁸⁴

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“The head of the smuggling industry ... generally has connections with immigration officers in Malaysia or elsewhere. They hire the low-level smugglers, like women recruiters and men in their 20s and 30s, to do the recruitment and all the organizing and then to get them to Malaysia. The profit is shared between them - the head and the network of low-level smugglers.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY3

Identifying clients

The survey findings indicate that less than one in three potential smuggling clients are actively targeted by smugglers. What commonly happens is that **intending migrants and refugees, or their family members, approach smugglers to request their services.**

The first contact between a person intending to migrate and a smuggler is more commonly initiated by the person to be smuggled or their family and friends (reported by 69% of smuggled people surveyed), rather than the smuggler (31%). They mainly contact the smuggler by phone or in person, and to a lesser extent on social media. Over half of those who were approached by the smuggler were contacted by phone, another third in person and just one eighth on social media. This means that just 4% of all smuggled people surveyed were actively approached by a smuggler on social media, mostly comprising Bangladeshis surveyed in Malaysia.

Bangladeshis surveyed in Malaysia are predominantly in contact with their smugglers through social media: 38% were approached by the smuggler on social media, while 36% approached the smuggler themselves on social media. According to key informants, potential smuggling clients in Indonesia are also targeted through traditional media outlets (local radio and television)⁸⁵ and social media (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook).⁸⁶ Nevertheless, none of the smuggled Indonesians surveyed for this research used social media for contact with smugglers.

Smuggling agents operate in the locations of origin or previous residence of smuggled people. Potential clients are **referred to smugglers by members of their immediate or extended families** already residing in the country of destination or residing in their location of origin. Some of these family members have prior experiences of being smuggled.

Interviews for this research indicate that women from Myanmar often have their smuggling organized – and in some cases paid for - by their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers or aunts. Some men from Myanmar also have their smuggling organized by fathers, grandparents, spouses, brothers-in-law or aunts, but there are fewer indications that family members pay the smuggling fees.

A Chin woman was sent by her family to her aunt in Yangon, Myanmar, who contacted the smuggling agent. The aunt had already sent her own child to Malaysia with the same smuggler and was in touch with the smugglers throughout the interviewee’s journey. The smugglers provided her with updates on the progress of the journey.

Chin woman from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia, MY_CHN_HY1

Other interviewees were **referred to smugglers by friends and fellow villagers.** For example, a Chin woman from Myanmar contacted people from her village who were the parents of people previously smuggled and they gave her the smuggler’s contact details.

According to key informants, Indonesian people intending to migrate for work also access smugglers through family, acquaintances and intermediaries. Many Indonesians already know someone who has been smuggled so they use that contact and knowledge to access smuggling themselves.

Families and friends are also involved in organizing the smuggling of Afghans and Somalis to Southeast Asia. Seven Afghan men interviewed for this research, including three men aged 18-29 years and four in their 30s and 40s, had the smuggling journey organized for them by relatives (parents, brothers and uncles). The brother of an Afghan woman arranged everything with the smuggler and the father of another Afghan woman arranged the smuggling for the whole family. Two Somali men in their late thirties said that their families organized everything on their behalf.

Job brokering

Employers also cooperate with smugglers and facilitate the contacts of Southeast Asians moving within the region with smugglers, so that the smuggled people can migrate to work for them. In some of these cases, where indicators of deception, coercion and exploitation are in place, this may (but does not necessarily) constitute trafficking in persons (see section 6 below on Abuses).

Smugglers may also, in turn, refer Southeast Asian migrants to potential employers. Seven percent of smuggled people surveyed for this research stated that their smuggler also helped them to find a job. This comprises 51% of Bangladeshis surveyed in Malaysia, 27% of Laotians in Thailand, 7% of Cambodians in Thailand and less than 1% of respondents from Myanmar.

“

“They [smugglers] are not just transporting you from Pulau Sebatik [island in Indonesia] to Tawau [Malaysia], but they also facilitate your journey from Tawau to your workplace at a rural plantation estate [in Malaysia]. In fact, some also help secure your job at the plantation companies in the inner part of Sabah [Malaysia].”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY7

Three Laotian interviewees in Thailand described how smugglers coordinated with their future employers in the country of destination and how the employer arranged the smuggling journey for them. One Laotian man was referred to a smuggler by a friend who had already been smuggled to Thailand via his employer to work on a plantation. Another Laotian man was referred to a smuggler by his “sister” (actual relationship unclear) who was already working on the smuggler’s plantation in Thailand. A key informant in Thailand described similar dynamics in relation to the involvement of employers in the smuggling of Cambodians to Thailand.

A Laotian man described how he stayed in contact with the employer throughout the journey. The employer had informed him which exact pier to show up at, at the Thai-Lao PDR river border, to wait for the boat. He and his wife waited, the boat arrived and they were dropped off at the employer’s farm.

Laotian man interviewed in Thailand, TH_LAO_SB3

Smuggling of migrants and related offences

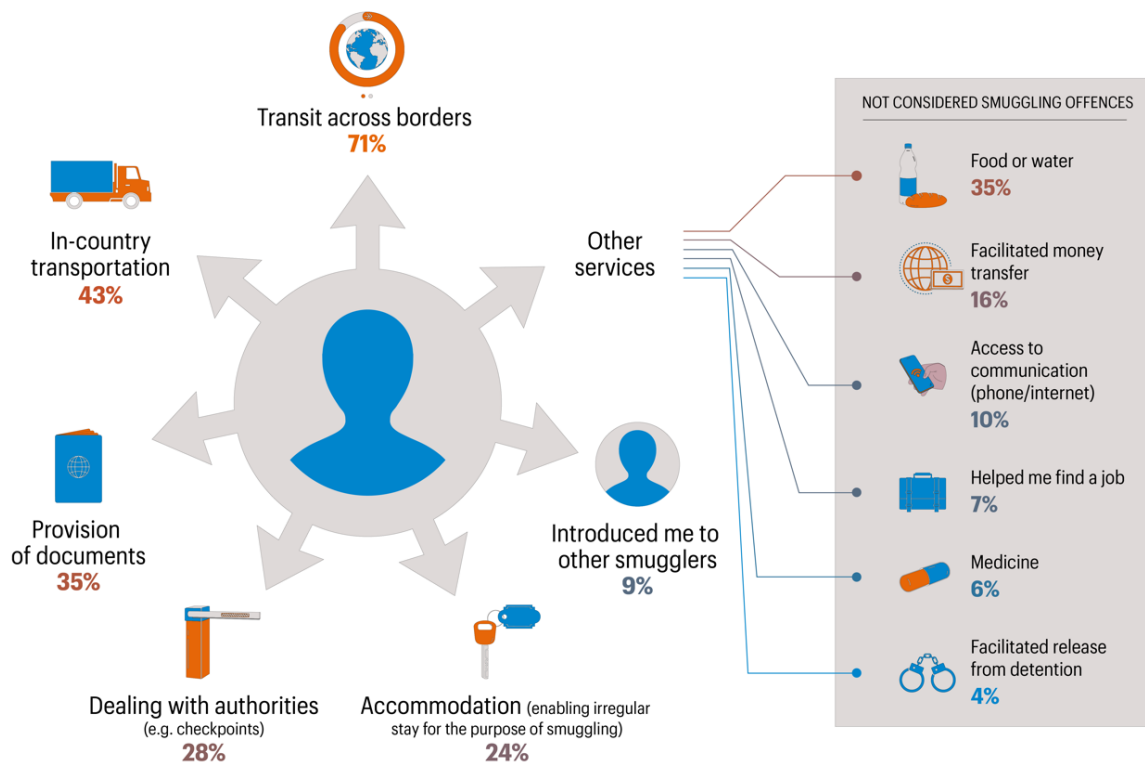
Smuggling of migrants and related offences

Smuggling of Migrants: the procurement of the illegal entry of a person into a state, in order to obtain a financial or other material benefit (**art. 3, Smuggling of Migrants Protocol**).

Smuggling-Related Offences: document fraud for the purposes of enabling smuggling of migrants, for a financial or other material benefit; and enabling a person to irregularly remain in a state, for a financial or other material benefit (**art. 6, Smuggling of Migrants Protocol**).

Among 4,785 migrants and refugees surveyed for this research, 3,977 used a smuggler. The most cited services provided by smugglers were **transit across borders** (by 2,838 people), **in-country transportation** (1,704), **provision of travel and ID documents** (1,384), **dealing with authorities (e.g., at checkpoints)** (1,120), **accommodation** (955) and introductions to other smugglers (370). This section examines these smuggling offences in more detail

Services Provided by Smugglers and Travel Facilitators



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data. Note: N = 3,977 people surveyed who used smugglers.

Apart from services that constitute a smuggling offence according to the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, smugglers also provide food and water (1,383), facilitate money transfer (may or may not be linked to smuggling) (654), access to communications (phone/internet) (401) and medicine (251). Smugglers also helped 284 respondents to find a job and facilitated the release from a situation of deprivation of liberty of 161 respondents. Almost all survey respondents who mentioned smugglers facilitating money transfers were from Bangladesh,

Myanmar or Afghanistan, all countries where informal money transfer systems (*hawala/hundi*) are widely used.⁸⁷ This is particularly common for Bangladeshi respondents (37%).

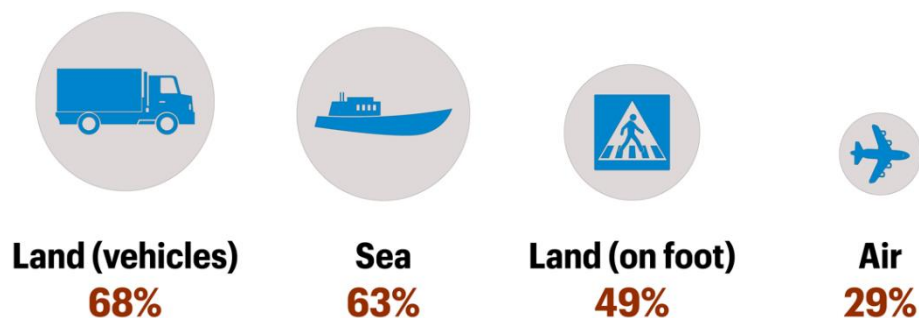
Facilitation of irregular entry for profit: Transportation

Depending on the route taken and the nature of the terrain, people in the region are **smuggled on seaborne vessels, riverboats, buses, trains, trucks, vans, pickups, cars, motorbikes and on foot**. People from outside the region are also **smuggled by air on commercial carriers**. Seventy-one per cent of smuggled people surveyed used smugglers to transit across borders. This is most common among Afghans: 82% of Afghan respondents were smuggled across borders; 80% of Laotian respondents; 68% of people from Myanmar; 58% of Cambodians; 40% of Bangladeshis; 37% of Indonesians; 35% of Somalis; and 17% of Vietnamese.

Forty-three per cent of smuggled people surveyed were provided with in-country transport. This was the case for 65% of Somalis surveyed; 52% of Laotians; 44% of Bangladeshis; 39% of Indonesians; 38% of Cambodians; 35% of Vietnamese; 34% of people from Myanmar; and 25% of Afghans.

Among 3,977 smuggled people surveyed for this research in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, the majority (68%) travelled by land vehicle at some point. More than half (63%) travelled by boat and 53% travelled on foot at some point. Less than one-third (29%) travelled by plane, mostly Afghans, Bangladeshi and Somalis, as well as Indonesians.

Modes of Transport Used by Surveyed People



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data. Note: of a total of 3,977 smuggled people surveyed. Land (vehicles) includes motorbikes, trucks, trains, buses and cars.

To a certain extent, **the mode of smuggling is determined by how much a smuggled person can afford to pay**, with smuggling by air being the safest and most expensive option.



“There is also the economy of smuggling, if you have a lot of money, you can go by plane and it's relatively safe. And so obviously the more money you have, the safer it will be.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY2

Smuggling from Myanmar generally involves a sea journey. All but one of 27 Rohingya women and 82 men surveyed for prior research in Indonesia in 2021-2022 travelled by boat at some point during their journey.⁸⁸

For many Rohingya people, **sea smuggling involves boarding and disembarking multiple vessels**. Rohingya people are transported on smaller boats offshore, to embark a larger vessel at sea. Several Rohingya women and men interviewed for this research in Indonesia described boarding smaller vessels from Teknaf (southeast Bangladesh), changing to one or two other small vessels, and then boarding bigger ships on the high seas. Smuggled people from Myanmar and Bangladesh **congregate on these larger vessels to embark on longer sea smuggling journeys** south to Malaysia and Indonesia.

Rohingya people interviewed for this research were smuggled on larger vessels (carrying 55-1,000 passengers) by sea from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Indonesia and Malaysia, on journeys that took between two weeks and six months. They were smuggled on smaller boats (for fishing or transporting produce) between Bangladesh and Myanmar, and between Malaysia and Indonesia (carrying around 20 passengers). According to a key informant interviewed in Thailand, smaller fishing trawlers are used for the journey from Bangladesh to the port of Sittwe in western Myanmar, and then larger vessels from Myanmar.

A Rohingya woman interviewed in Indonesia was smuggled by sea from Rakhine State (Myanmar), first on a small vessel, and from there onto a larger ship, with about 1,000 people on board; both Bangladeshi and Rohingya people.

Rohingya woman from Myanmar interviewed in Indonesia, IND_ROH_SB6

Indonesia's natural geography, comprising thousands of islands, makes sea crossings more feasible and more difficult to detect. Indonesia has multiple long maritime and land borders, making patrolling, as well as search and rescue, very difficult. Monitoring smaller, traditional boats is extremely challenging, according to Indonesian state key informants.

Some people from Myanmar are also **smuggled on foot and in road vehicles from Myanmar into Thailand**, usually across mountainous territory. One Rohingya woman travelled by bus from her village of origin to Myawaddy in southeast Myanmar and was smuggled from there to the border city of Mae Sot (Thailand), and onwards by pickup with a group of around seventy people to the foot of a mountain, which they traversed by foot for around eight days *via* Kanchanaburi (Thailand) to Bangkok.

A Karen man from Myanmar was transported by minibus and on foot within Myanmar and then on foot across the border into Thailand, where he and a group of 83 other people were arrested and returned to Myanmar by bus. Four days later they were smuggled back into Thailand along a different route on large pickup trucks usually used to transport vegetables or livestock, and on foot.

Karen man from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand, TH_MYN_SB3

Rohingya, Chin and Karen people are then **transported within Thailand by car to Bangkok to remain there, or to the Thailand-Malaysia border to be smuggled into Malaysia**. A Rohingya man was taken to the Myanmar-Thailand border by car, and from there, with a group of fifty people, he was smuggled by foot across the mountains into Thailand and from there by car to Bangkok. A Rohingya man interviewed was first smuggled by sea from Sittwe in western Myanmar to Thailand, with twenty other Rohingya people, and then smuggled on foot across the Thailand-Malaysia border. A Karen woman from Myanmar was smuggled with a group by

bus to the Myanmar-Thailand border, on foot through the mountains, and then onwards to Bangkok by car with a different smuggler; the journey took eight days in total.

For other Southeast Asians smuggled into Thailand, the border crossing is generally by land and often on foot. A Vietnamese man was smuggled with his wife and his youngest child by motorbike into Cambodia. There he was advised by fellow travellers to take a taxi to the Thai border and cross on foot at night. People are smuggled from Lao PDR and Cambodia to Thailand in vans, cars, buses, motorbikes and on foot; some cross the Mekong river with the help of locals.⁸⁹

For Indonesians smuggled to Malaysia, the journey is relatively short, and commonly by sea or by air. Among Indonesians surveyed in Malaysia for this research, 77% travelled by plane. An Indonesian man interviewed was smuggled by air from Surabaya (Indonesia) to Kuala Lumpur. A key informant who interviewed a group of Indonesians from Sabah on the Malaysian part of Borneo island described their smuggling journey as smooth, using a small boat with two engines and avoiding the Malaysian Coast Guard by making evasive manoeuvres.

As mentioned above, smuggling to Southeast Asia from other regions is multimodal. The smuggling journey usually starts with **flights from the country of origin**, followed by **smuggling by sea, land and air within Southeast Asia** to the final destination. An Afghan man interviewed in Indonesia, for example, was smuggled by air from Kabul, Afghanistan to Kuala Lumpur. From Malaysia, he was smuggled by boat to Indonesia and then for 16 hours by car to Padang (West Sumatra, Indonesia), before boarding a domestic flight to Jakarta.

Similarly, two Somali men and one Somali woman interviewed in Indonesia were smuggled by air from Mogadishu (Somalia) to Kuala Lumpur, before being smuggled to Indonesia by boat. A Bangladeshi woman interviewed in Malaysia was smuggled by air to Bali (Indonesia) and from there by sea to Malaysia.

Document fraud for the purpose of smuggling of migrants

Document fraud offences are particularly common in the context of smuggling by air.

Twenty-nine per cent of all people surveyed travelled by air at some point during their journey. Almost one third (31%) of the smuggled people surveyed for this research were provided with forged or fraudulent travel or identity documents by smugglers. Document fraud offences relate to passports, visas and entry/exit stamps, and generally involve corruption. Such offences are commonly perpetrated by smugglers on behalf of clients from outside the Southeast Asia region.



“We stayed in [I.R.] Iran for more than two years, but the situation was terrible and we didn’t have any documents. We wanted to go to [Türkiye] but one of our friends in Tehran suggested that he knows an Iranian who has connections in Malaysia and the Indonesian Embassy [unclear in which country] can provide us with fake passports and visas for air travel to Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta. It took around six months for us to obtain the passports, visas and tickets.”

Afghan man interviewed in Malaysia, MY_AFG_AB1

Some interviewees mentioned documents obtained fraudulently from corrupt consular officials. An Afghan woman interviewed in Malaysia described how her father paid a smuggler working at a travel agency in Kabul to obtain a Malaysian visa from the Malaysian consulate in Pakistan. Two Bangladeshi men interviewed in Malaysia had paid smugglers in Bangladesh for visas in

advance of travel. Four Somalis interviewed in Indonesia had their visas arranged by smugglers. According to one Somali man, a smuggler in Indonesia arranged for his fraudulent visa there and sent it to the smuggler in Somalia, who used it to process his flight tickets.

Document fraud is also evident in smuggling of Indonesians to Malaysia. According to key informants, some Indonesians are smuggled to Malaysia by air and enter using their original passport with an Indonesian exit stamp. They are instructed by smugglers to use a specific immigration counter to get a Malaysian entry stamp, which is subsequently torn out of the passport to facilitate over-staying their visas.

Enabling irregular stay for profit: Accommodation

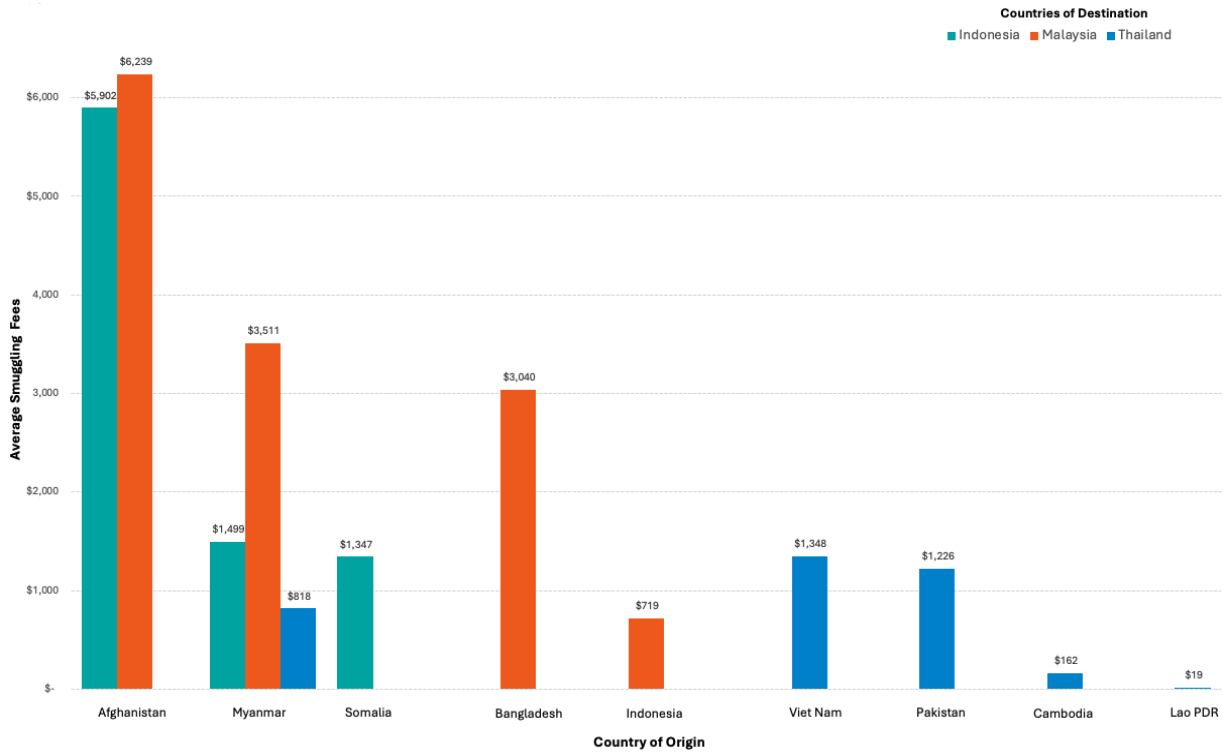
When smugglers provide accommodation to smuggled refugees and migrants, this may constitute an element of the **smuggling-related offence of enabling irregular stay for a financial or material benefit** as per the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol. Fifteen per cent of smuggled people surveyed for this research stated that smugglers provided them with accommodation. Rohingya and Chin people interviewed mentioned being accommodated by smugglers and their associates in Myanmar prior to departing (unlikely to constitute a smuggling-related offence as the element of irregular stay is absent) and in Thailand and Malaysia: in a hut, a beauty salon, a house, a motel and outside in a forest.

Smuggled Afghans are also provided with accommodation by smugglers. Smugglers accommodated an Afghan man in a coastal village in India, before smuggling him by sea to Indonesia, in a small house with 25 other people of diverse nationalities, including a fellow Afghan couple. Another young Afghan man was instructed by smugglers to leave Kuala Lumpur International Airport and go to a specific hotel to meet another person. The next day he was smuggled by air to Indonesia and picked up from the airport and taken to another hotel. A Vietnamese man, his wife and his youngest child were accommodated by smugglers in a house for one night in Cambodia *en route* to Thailand.

5. Fees, Proceeds and Payments

Fees

Average Smuggling Fee by Country of Origin and Destination, in USD



Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants calculations based on 4Mi surveys conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre during 2022-2023 in partnership with the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

Note: Survey participants were selected through both purposive and snowball sampling, so the results should be interpreted with caution. See section 7 - Methodology below for more details.

Smuggling fees vary significantly depending on the **distance travelled by the people being smuggled, how complicated the route is and how risky the journey is**. All sums mentioned in this section and throughout have been converted from various local currencies to US dollars for ease of understanding.⁹⁰

Smuggled people surveyed for this research paid an **average of \$2,380 in smuggling fees**. Men (\$2,506) paid on average higher fees than women (\$2,138), except among survey respondents in Malaysia, where women paid a higher average sum for smuggling. However, there was significant variance among respondents based on their origins and the routes taken. On average, Afghans smuggled to Indonesia and Malaysia paid the highest amount (\$6,004), while Laotians smuggled to Thailand paid the least (\$19, N=6).

After Afghans, Bangladeshis paid the highest average fee - \$3,046 – for smuggling to Malaysia. It is interesting to note in this context that 47% of smuggled Bangladeshis surveyed said they used a smuggler because they thought it would be cheaper than travelling independently. Somalis surveyed for this research who were smuggled to Indonesia paid an average of \$1,351 in smuggling fees, while Pakistanis paid \$648 (N=2) for smuggling to Thailand.

Smuggled people from Myanmar surveyed spent an average of \$2,207 on smuggling fees. **Fees vary, however, depending on people's ethnic origin**, with Rohingya people surveyed spending an average of \$2,544. Indonesians smuggled to Malaysia paid an average of \$719, while Vietnamese people smuggled to Thailand spent the equivalent of \$1,277 and Cambodians smuggled to Thailand \$161. The table below provides an overview of smuggling fees paid for various routes within and to the Southeast Asia region.

Overview of Fees Paid Per Route based on Field Research

Nationality/ethnicity of smuggled people	Origin	Destination	Smuggling mode	Fee per person, average or range (US\$)	Source
Myanmar	Myanmar/ Bangladesh	Malaysia/ Indonesia/ Thailand	Sea, air and land	\$2,207	Surveys
Rohingya/ Karen from Myanmar	Myanmar	Thailand	Land (road vehicle/ on foot)	\$115-720	4 migrant interviews
Rohingya from Myanmar	Bangladesh	Thailand	Land, sea and river	\$1,440-1,818	2 migrant interviews
Rohingya/Chin from Myanmar	Myanmar	Malaysia	Sea and land	\$220-6,700 (usually \$2,000)	Migrant interviews
Rohingya from Myanmar	Myanmar	Indonesia	Sea and land	\$1,350-2,400	Migrant interviews
Rohingya from Myanmar	Bangladesh	Malaysia	Sea and land	\$220-2,600	Key informants
Indonesian	Indonesia	Malaysia	Sea, air and land	\$367-844	Surveys (\$719), migrant interviews; key informants
Cambodian	Cambodia	Thailand	Land	\$161-455	Surveys (\$161); migrant interview; key informants
Laotian	Lao PDR	Thailand	Land	\$19	Surveys
Vietnamese	Viet Nam	Thailand	Land	\$1,277	Surveys
Afghan	Afghanistan	Indonesia/ Malaysia	Air, sea and land	\$6,004	Surveys
Afghan	Afghanistan	Indonesia	Air, sea and land	\$5,200	Migrant interviews
Afghan	Afghanistan	Malaysia	Air, sea and land	\$1,200-6,650	Migrant interviews
Bangladeshi	Bangladesh	Malaysia	Air, sea and land	\$3,046	Surveys
Pakistani	Pakistan	Thailand	Air, sea and land	\$648	Surveys (N=2)
Somali	Somalia	Indonesia	Air, sea and land	\$1,351-3,000	Surveys (\$1,351); migrant interviews

Note: These amounts should be interpreted as indicative only. The amounts for which the source is surveys are average sums, while all other amounts are ranges based on sums mentioned in interviews.

Some people travelling along these routes are assisted by facilitators but not charged fees. A Rohingya woman interviewed in Malaysia, for instance, said that she and her youngest daughter did not pay anything to take the journey and had just followed people who were leaving Myanmar by boat. Key informants interviewed in Australia mentioned that some Chin

people are simply helped to cross the border irregularly, without any payment, which does not constitute a smuggling offence. When actors **facilitate irregular border crossings and do not receive a financial or other material benefit for their services, their actions do not constitute smuggling of migrants** as defined in international law. Other Chin people pay lower fees for facilitation, which nevertheless does constitute smuggling.

Smuggling fees may also cover **job brokering for people from Myanmar smuggled to Thailand and Malaysia**, according to interviewees and key informants. In general, Rohingya people smuggled from Bangladesh pay more for smuggling than those smuggled directly from Myanmar (over half of Rohingya smuggled by sea during 2022-2023 departed from Bangladesh, see section 3 - Drivers of Smuggling above).

Different tekongs (agents) charge varying fees for smuggling of Indonesians to Malaysia. *Tekongs* may also charge fees for accommodation and/or a domestic flight within Indonesia - which do not constitute smuggling offences. Other Southeast Asians smuggled to Thailand pay relatively low fees. A Laotian man interviewed for this research in Thailand, for example, paid a smuggling fee of \$57 for himself and his wife.

According to a key informant in Thailand, some employers of smuggled Cambodians pay their smuggling fees for them. Two Laotian women interviewed in Thailand did not pay smuggling fees at all. Instead they received money for expenses (\$14-43) from the future employer by bank transfer, on the understanding that the fees would be deducted from their salaries once they started working. This scenario presents indicators of a potential case of trafficking in persons (see section 6 - Abuses below).

Due to the far higher prevalence of smuggling by air in the context of inter-regional smuggling, the related need for fraudulent documents, and the longer distances travelled, **people from outside the Southeast Asia region pay significantly higher smuggling fees** than those smuggled within the region.

A Bangladeshi man paid the smuggler \$200 in advance for visas and flights and his family paid an additional \$5,000 after he arrived in Indonesia. The smugglers had promised to smuggle him to Italy.

Bangladeshi man interviewed in Malaysia, MY_BGD_HY2

The highest smuggling fee paid among all survey respondents for this research was by an Afghan man, the owner of a construction business, who paid around \$18,000. He sold off all his assets and properties to make the payment. He paid the smuggling fee in full before departure and received travel documents and plane tickets to Indonesia. That high fee did not deliver him to his final intended destination of Australia to be reunited with his family, but only to Indonesia.

There were isolated and inconclusive indications from the research of an **increase in smuggling fees since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic**. One key informant in Malaysia suggested that smuggling fees for returning to Indonesia (see section 2 - Migrant Smuggling Routes above) had been cheaper before the pandemic. An interviewee from Myanmar in Thailand mentioned that the fee had doubled since the previous time he travelled, from \$172 in 2016-2018 to \$341 since the onset of the pandemic.

Methods of payment

Smugglers receive fees through various methods and modes of payment. Among survey respondents, 33% paid in full at the destination, 35% paid in full before departure and 16%

paid in instalments. There was no significant difference between genders (<5%), but wide differences are reported along different routes.

People from Myanmar generally pay smuggling fees in cash or by bank transfer. Other Southeast Asians also often paying smuggling fees in cash. According to a key informant in Thailand, transporters also courier cash payments to the smuggling organizer.

Many Afghans pay smuggling fees **in cash and/or through *hawala***. Recent UNODC research on migrant smuggling and *hawala* found that people intending to be smuggled often lodge the fee, or part of the fee, with *hawaladars* in Afghanistan before travelling. Smuggled Afghans confirm that the payment can be issued by the *hawaladar* to the smugglers only after they arrive, as a form of guarantee – referred to as “blocking” the money.⁹¹

Smuggling fees are often paid with **loans to smuggled people from family, friends, loan sharks or smugglers**, according to a number of interviewees and key informants. A Rohingya woman had to borrow money from relatives already in Thailand to pay the smuggling fee. The parents of a Rohingya man interviewed in Thailand borrowed money to pay a ransom to the smugglers to release the man and his wife.

A young woman from Myanmar mentioned her family borrowing money from fellow villagers and pawning the family’s land to pay the smuggling fees for her. A young Chin woman interviewed in Malaysia did not pay anything upfront, but after arrival she paid off a debt of \$1,625 that had been negotiated with the smuggler by her aunt. **Indebtedness as a result of paying migrant smuggling fees** has been identified as a factor of vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking in persons in many world regions.⁹²

It should be noted that 5% of smuggled people surveyed, and a number of interviewees in the three countries, **paid for their journey with their labour**. This is common among some Rohingya, Chin and Bangladeshi people smuggled to Malaysia. They are told they will pay the smuggling fee once they get a job in the country of destination; or they call their families after arrival, who sell their land or other belongings to make the payment. Cambodians and Laotians may also have the smuggling fees deducted from their wages after arrival in the destination country (see next section on Abuses).

6. Abuses

Smuggling of Migrants Protocol and the Protection of the Rights of Smuggled Migrants

In addition to the prevention, investigation and prosecution of smuggling offences, the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol covers the **protection of the rights of people who have been the object of smuggling offences** (art. 4).

Article 16 of the Protocol requires States Parties to take **protection and assistance measures** in respect of people who are the object of smuggling of migrants offences, including:

- "...all appropriate measures, including legislation if necessary, to preserve and protect" smuggled people's rights, "in particular the right to life and the right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;"
- "appropriate measures to afford migrants appropriate protection against violence that may be inflicted upon them, whether by individuals or groups, by reason of being" smuggled;
- "afford appropriate assistance to migrants whose lives or safety are endangered by reason of being" smuggled; and
- "take into account the special needs of women and children."

Article 6.3 of the Protocol sets out **aggravated smuggling offences** as smuggling offences committed in circumstances:

- (a) "That endanger, or are likely to endanger, the lives or safety of the migrants concerned; or
- (b) That entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants."

Three out of four smuggled people surveyed experienced some form of abuse during their journeys (75%). Physical violence is the most reported type overall (by 29% of smuggled people surveyed), perpetrated by various actors, and more commonly experienced by men (34%) than women (24%). Twenty-two per cent of all respondents were asked for bribes or extorted, and almost one in five (18%) were subject to deprivation of liberty, with no significant gender differences. Non-physical violence (e.g., harassment) was more common for men (18%) than women (13%).

Eleven per cent of women and 6% of men experienced sexual violence,⁹³ while 9% of men and 6% of women witnessed death. A UNODC study on a gender perspective on aggravated smuggling offences in North Africa and Central America found that abuses perpetrated in the smuggling context are gendered, with men and boys experiencing more physical violence and inhuman and degrading treatment, and women and girls experiencing more sexual violence.⁹⁴

Higher proportions of smuggled Somalis (100%), Cambodians (72%) and people from Myanmar (68%) surveyed reported abuses, while this was less prevalent for Bangladeshis (40%), Afghans (34%), Indonesians (8%) and Laotians (2%).

Rohingya people are vulnerable to abuses perpetrated by all actors, because of their statelessness, protracted displacement in Bangladesh for many, discrimination, poverty and indebtedness,⁹⁵ as well as long sea smuggling journeys endured to avoid interceptions and pushbacks.⁹⁶ Sixty-eight percent of smuggled people from Myanmar surveyed reported abuses during the smuggling journey.

“

“Agents [smugglers] are meant to abuse you, that is the law by which agents live.”

Rohingya man interviewed in Indonesia, IND_ROH_SB2

The UNODC study on aggravated smuggling offences referenced above found that, while smugglers do commit aggravated smuggling offences against refugees and migrants, the majority of abuses are committed by other actors.⁹⁷ Among the actors **perceived by smuggled people surveyed as likely to perpetrate abuses were military and police** (by 62% of respondents), **smugglers** (37%), and **to a lesser extent border guards** (25%) and **criminal gangs** (22%).⁹⁸ Thirty-nine percent of smuggled people surveyed who answered the question perceived military and police as likely to perpetrate physical violence; to ask for bribes or carry out extortion (26%); to cause death (21%); and to commit sexual violence (10%) during the journey.

Just one in five (21%) of those who answered the question reported not experiencing any forms of abuse during the journey. Vietnamese were the only group where more than a third (36%) reported not experiencing any form of abuse. 187 Vietnamese people were surveyed in Thailand, of whom 60% used smugglers. Among the interviewees for this research were also a smaller number of people (including Afghans, Laotians, Chin, Rohingya and Somalis) who said that they felt safe throughout the journey, had a positive experience with the smuggler(s) and did not encounter any problems.

Food and water deprivation, dangerous conditions, deception and violence

Many smuggled people, particularly people from Myanmar and Bangladesh, are **deprived of sufficient food and water** during the smuggling journey, according to interviewees and key informants.

Some negative experiences reported by smuggled people involve **poor and dangerous conditions of smuggling** by sea and overland; the journeys can be arduous, dangerous and “scary,” according to multiple interviewees and key informants in all three countries. A Rohingya woman interviewed in Indonesia, for example, described poor conditions on the boat – the passengers could not move, shower or change their clothes, and she felt in danger from the male passengers. A Rohingya man interviewed in Indonesia described how the engine of the boat they were travelling on broke down, amid worsening weather conditions. This led the smuggler navigating the boat to dock at the nearest coast – Indonesia, where they were rescued by fishers. A key informant in Thailand referred to a recent case of smuggling of Rohingya people in a refrigerated truck, who were close to the point of asphyxiating when they were intercepted (no further details provided).

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A young Rohingya woman initially had a positive experience with smugglers on the ship. However, the smugglers then abandoned them:

“The ship I was on, we did not have any problems, such as people being beaten up. We got enough food and water. We were just cheated as the captain and the agent abandoned us. When this happened, we felt like we are all in danger. And we didn’t have any sense of security. I remember feeling that in a few days we would all die while at sea. We had very few chances of survival because our engine had stopped working. We had little fuel left.”

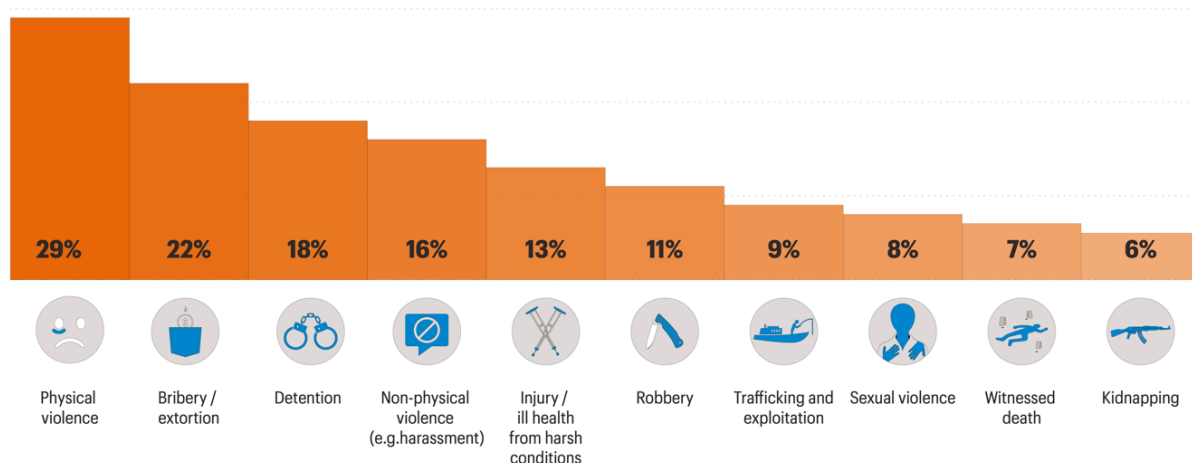
The 600-700 mostly Rohingya passengers were subsequently rescued by Indonesian fishers who took them to Aceh in northern Sumatra, Indonesia. There the Indonesian Navy took them closer to the Malaysian coast, where the Malaysian Navy took them back to Indonesian waters, and they were finally disembarked in Indonesia.

Rohingya woman from Myanmar interviewed in Indonesia, IND_ROH_SB6

Some smugglers **deceive smuggled people with regard to travel itineraries, final destinations and jobs**, according to Rohingya and Bangladeshi interviewees, and key informants. For example, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Malaysia had thought that he was on a legal trip to Italy but was smuggled to Malaysia and left there. A young woman from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand paid extra to the smuggler for the brokering of a job, but the service was never provided. However, just 27% of all survey respondents who used a smuggler agreed or strongly agreed that they felt misled by smugglers, while 43% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Smugglers perpetrate physical violence against smuggled people, according to Rohingya and Bangladeshi interviewees, key informants and survey respondents for this research.⁹⁹ Smuggled people surveyed directly experienced and witnessed abuses perpetrated by smugglers, including physical violence and deprivation of liberty (each cited by 27% of respondents), bribery/extortion (11%), injury/ill health from harsh conditions (10%), death (9%), sexual violence (8%), non-physical violence (e.g. harassment), (7%), robbery (6%) and kidnapping (6%).

Types of Abuses experienced by Surveyed People



Source: UNODC calculations based on MMC 4Mi Survey Data. Note: N= 4,196 people surveyed who answered this question.

Key informants in Malaysia and Thailand referred to the high risk of **sexual harassment, abuse and violence** in the context of male smugglers providing transportation, and

particularly accommodation, to female smuggling clients. Seven per cent of survey respondents perceived smugglers as likely to commit sexual violence during the journey.

Almost one in every three women surveyed (30%) and 11% of men reported being afraid of sexual violence in general in the most dangerous location they had travelled through. The majority of women reporting this fear are from Myanmar (56%), and the remainder are from Somalia (23%) and Pakistan (10%).

1,015 people surveyed for this research travelled with children. They identified physical violence, death and sexual violence as among the top three protection risks for children. Seventy-two per cent of respondents considered that children are very highly or highly exposed to these risks. A key informant from an NGO working at the Thai-Cambodian border mentioned the case of smugglers raping a Cambodian girl while transporting her through the forests to Thailand.

Extortion, deprivation of liberty, exploitation and trafficking in persons

Among the other abuses that may constitute aggravated smuggling offences when perpetrated by smugglers are extortion, deprivation of liberty, exploitation and trafficking in persons. **Extortion and deprivation of liberty are perpetrated by smugglers** particularly against Rohingya people - within Myanmar before departure and *en route* -, but also against Bangladeshis, Afghans and Somalis in Indonesia and Malaysia. Extortion was reported by 22% of survey respondents and deprivation of liberty by 18%.

Perpetrators deprive smuggled people of their liberty and subject them to physical violence in order to extort money from them and their family members. They keep people captive and pressure their relatives to pay as much as they can to secure the person's release, with sometimes fatal consequences for those for whom money is not forthcoming. Smugglers demand ransoms ranging between the equivalent of \$450 and \$2,400, according to interviewees and key informants.

A young Rohingya man interviewed in Thailand was beaten and extorted by smugglers in the forest in Myanmar, who called his parents and demanded the equivalent of around \$2,400 as a ransom: "*They would beat me while they were talking on the phone with my parents so that my parents could hear me scream*" (TH_ROH_FI03). Smugglers locked up a Bangladeshi woman (interviewed in Malaysia) in a room in Indonesia with no food and demanded money. Smugglers deprived a Somali man (interviewed in Indonesia) of liberty in Malaysia for two weeks. Then when they arrived in Indonesia, the smugglers stole everything from the group as they disembarked from the boat, including their phones and clothes.

A Rohingya man paid \$900 for transportation from Cox's Bazar to Teknaf (Bangladesh) and onward to Sittwe (Myanmar) by sea. He paid an additional \$900 to the smuggler in Myawaddy (Myanmar) for the rest of the journey to Thailand, but the smuggler demanded \$450 more. Those in the group who could pay were taken by another smuggler across the border into Thailand, while the interviewee and some others who could not pay were beaten and held against their will. They subsequently escaped and crossed the border independently.

Rohingya man from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand, TH_MYN_FI05

People smuggled to, within and from Southeast Asia are subject to **forced labour and trafficking for forced labour** perpetrated by smugglers and by employers with or without connections to the smugglers. At least ten key informants across the three countries under study referred to this issue. The forced labour may involve deception, debt bondage, non-

payment of wages and poor working conditions, as well as sexual harassment and abuse for women.

Being smuggled leaves people vulnerable to forced labour by employers who are unconnected to smugglers, but can take advantage of people's irregular migration status. Four Indonesians interviewed in Malaysia had their salaries deducted or withheld by employers on arrival, and their passports withheld, with some indication that this was as payment for smuggling.

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“So, it’s a gamble, if you meet a good employer or a good person, then you will have your rights protected. If not, you cannot do anything.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY2

When smuggling is linked to the brokering of jobs (reported by 7% of survey respondents), as is often the case for Rohingya and Chin people from Myanmar, as well as Bangladeshis, Indonesians, Cambodians and Laotians, they may be subjected to a situation of debt bondage. According to key informants, refugees and migrants have their wages deducted to transfer money to smugglers as a payment for job brokering. Such cases often present indicators of trafficking in persons for forced labour. A key informant for this research in Thailand described the situation of a man from Myanmar who paid the equivalent of \$786 to be smuggled from Myanmar and for the brokering of a job in a restaurant. He was working at the restaurant and engaging in sex work at a “massage parlour” in order to pay off his debt to the smuggler.

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“In the fishing sector in Thailand, there were many migrants from Myanmar who were promised a job in the agriculture sector or construction. They paid for it, then they were brought illegally across into Thailand, and they were put on the fishing boats. They were confused but they didn’t know what to do because they had paid so much money for the job, and they had to just accept their fate. Plus, they don’t speak Thai. And that’s how a lot of exploitation began.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY13

Forced labour of Rohingya people is perpetrated in the deep-sea fishing industry, with reports of non-payment of wages, deception in relation to the nature of the work and even intentional killing (being thrown overboard from fishing trawlers). Rohingya people may be recruited for this form of exploitation by smugglers, in which case this constitutes an aggravated smuggling offence, or by other actors while they are being smuggled by sea.¹⁰⁰

Three Laotian interviewees in Thailand were smuggled there specifically to work on a tobacco farm, through relatives and friends already working on the farm, and with the future employer organizing the smuggling.

Situations of debt bondage and forced labour linked to smuggling of Indonesian and Cambodian adults and children into Malaysia - who pay high fees for job brokering - were specifically mentioned by key informants. Job brokering fees are estimated by key informants at around the equivalent of \$534 for Indonesians and \$3,000-4,000 for Cambodians. Migrants may end up in debt and have their wages deducted and/or be deceived about the nature of the work, potentially indicating a situation of trafficking for forced labour.

A key informant from an NGO in Malaysia indicated that some Indonesians arriving in Malaysia are subject to deception by recruiters who promise them jobs upon arrival and instruct them to enter irregularly and apply for the permit afterwards. They may not be aware that they are being smuggled. In some cases, they are deprived of their liberty by smugglers or recruiters prior to departing Indonesia and then instructed to enter Malaysia irregularly, a situation that presents indications of trafficking in persons.

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“How it works in the plantation is that there are contractors and these contractors are not the owners of the estates, they are just given contracts by the owners to run plantation activities on their estates. These activities could be harvesting or spraying chemical pesticides, and these contractors would bring their own workers [from Indonesia] to work at the estates. Some contractors would facilitate the entire journey of the migrant worker because they have a connection on every part of the route. [...E]very month the salary will be deducted to cover the recruitment costs. And that's where a lot of debt bondage cases happen in Sabah [Malaysia].”

Key informant interview in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY7

Rohingya and Bangladeshi women and girls are also smuggled to Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries to enter into **arranged marriage** with Rohingya or Bangladeshi men or men of other origins there.¹⁰¹ According to key informants, many women and girls see this as a pathway to a better life and a way to support their families. Many of their family members perceive this practice as facilitating the escape of women and girls from harsh conditions and the risk of sexual violence in their homes or in refugee or internally displaced persons camps. The intended husbands often pay the smuggling fees in these cases. Particularly for girls, but also for young women, these cases may present indicators of forced marriage, trafficking for forced marriage and/or trafficking for domestic servitude.

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A key informant described “arrangements made by Bangladeshi men in Malaysia with Bangladeshi agents who would call up people in Bangladesh to say look, there's this eligible bachelor here, do you want your girls to be sent to Malaysia for marriage? So we saw an increase in young girls being smuggled from Bangladesh to Malaysia for marriage. This is also because families in Bangladesh were struggling financially.”

Key informant interviewed in Malaysia, MY_KI_HY3

This study paints a comprehensive picture of the smuggling of migrants phenomenon in Southeast Asia, based on real, lived experiences of being smuggled and insights from professionals responding to smuggling on the ground.

The determinants of demand for smuggling of migrants in the region – lack of regular labour migration channels to match labour supply and demand; lack of regular channels for refugees to seek international protection; and corruption – interact with the supply of smuggling of migrants services. Sophisticated smuggling networks comprising offenders from countries of

origin, transit and destination operate in a market that also includes medium- and low-level offenders operating individually or on the basis of loose, *ad hoc* cooperation. Networks, groups or individual actors are more or less prominent depending on the mode of smuggling – land, sea or air -, the length and geographies of the routes, and the socioeconomic background of their customers.

A number of different crimes are committed in this context, in addition to the smuggling offences of facilitating irregular entry for profit, enabling irregular stay for profit and document fraud for the purposes of smuggling. Smugglers also commit aggravated smuggling offences that endanger the dignity, lives and safety of migrants and refugees. Public officials commit corruption offences in collusion with smugglers. Crimes against the person, such as physical and sexual violence, deprivation of liberty, extortion and trafficking in persons are committed by smugglers, public officials and employers.

The predominantly cash-based nature of smuggling fee transactions presents a substantial obstacle to financial investigations. While the fees paid per person may be relatively low, smugglers' profits depend on the scale of the operation - most smuggled people consulted for this research travelled in groups. Once the costs of operation for smugglers are factored in, the actual profits made by actors operating at different levels vary widely. Crimes related to these proceeds, particularly money laundering, are also committed in this context.

Counter-smuggling responses that aim to prevent the crime, bring perpetrators to justice and ensure protection for people who are the subject of smuggling offences can only be effective if they are tailored specifically to the real-life smuggling of migrants phenomenon. Understanding the drivers and root causes of smuggling in Southeast Asia is crucial to preventing the crime. Knowledge of how smuggling crimes – and related offences – are committed and by whom can ensure successful investigations and prosecutions. Finally, and crucially, preventing and mitigating the human costs of smuggling of migrants must be the focus of efforts to ensure that girls, boys, women and men of all backgrounds are protected from the risks and dangers of smuggling journeys.

7. Methodology

As in all UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants research, this StoryMap has been conducted by applying the Observatory Research Methodology.¹⁰² Both primary and secondary sources were analysed for the purposes of this research.

Field research on migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia was carried out during the period December 2022 to June 2023. A total of 4,785 surveys were administered in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, comprising: 1,086 surveys conducted in Indonesia; 2,049 in Malaysia; and 1,650 in Thailand. The vast majority of respondents had arrived in the country where the survey was carried out since 2021. A minority of respondents from each country of origin arrived in 2020. The exception are Afghans (12% arrived in 2017-2018; 50% in 2019; 12% in 2020; and 26% since 2021) and Somalis (49% arrived in 2019; 25% in 2020; 26% since 2021).

Breakdown of National Origin and Country of Survey

Country of survey	National origin	Number of surveys
Malaysia (2,049 surveys)	Myanmar (Rohingya)	948
	Bangladesh	344
	Myanmar (Chin)	321
	Indonesia	286
	Afghanistan	150
Thailand (1,650 surveys)	Myanmar (Rohingya)	495
	Myanmar (others)	292
	Cambodia	278
	Lao PDR	216
	Viet Nam	187
	Pakistan	182
Indonesia (1,086 surveys)	Myanmar (Rohingya)	444
	Afghanistan	360
	Somalia	282
Total number of surveys	All	4,785

The largest group of respondents is from Myanmar (2,500/4,785), accounting for 52% of the sample. Of the 2,500 respondents from Myanmar, the vast majority (75%) are Rohingya people (1,887). The remainder are people of Chin and other ethnicities (613) – many of whom are likely to also be in a refugee situation. The next most common nationalities are Afghans (510), Bangladeshis (344), and Indonesians (286) accounting for 11%, 7%, and 6%, respectively, of the total sample.

Most respondents are men (2,903), accounting for 61%, while women (1,882) comprise 39% of the sample. Seventy-four per cent of respondents of both genders are aged 18-35 years (3,545). While more than half of the respondents of every origin are men, in the case of Afghans (75%) and Bangladeshis (96%), the vast majority are men. See chart in section 1 - Context for full details of countries of origin of the survey sample.

The surveys were carried out according to the Mixed Migration Centre's data collection system (4Mi),¹⁰³ which uses a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Potential survey respondents are selected at key locations according to a small set of criteria and selected respondents often refer others who also fit the criteria. The data collection system takes a careful sampling approach, seeking diversity and providing rich, indicative insights on populations on the move. However, it is not representative of national or international mixed migration movements. Therefore, it cannot be used to provide estimates of the number or characteristics of the overall population of refugees and migrants on the move within and through Southeast Asia.

In addition, 60 people participated in in-depth interviews for the research during the period January to August 2023, providing essential qualitative information to contextualize the findings of the surveys and desk-based research. The interviewees comprised 23 women and 37 men.

In Indonesia, seven Afghan men were interviewed, six Somalis (three women and three men) and six Rohingya people (three men and three women) from Myanmar. In Malaysia, four Afghans (three men and one woman) were interviewed, three Bangladeshis (two men and one woman), four Indonesians (three men and one woman), and five Rohingya people (three men and two women) and four Chin people from Myanmar (two women and two men) were interviewed. In Thailand, five Rohingya people (three women and two men), two Karen people (one woman and one man), two Chin people (one woman and one man) and one Burmese man from Myanmar were interviewed, as well as three Cambodian women, four Vietnamese men and three Laotians (two men and one woman).

A total of 30 key informant interviews were carried out during 2023 for the research with a total of 35 interviewees from government authorities, civil society and academia, comprising 18 women and 17 men. The key informant interviews took place in Malaysia (14), Thailand (9), Australia (3), Indonesia (2), Bangladesh (3), the Netherlands (1) and the United States of America (1).

While every effort was made by the research team to ensure that the composition of the people surveyed and interviewed was as diverse and comprehensive as possible, certain limitations are unavoidable. It is difficult to access some of the most vulnerable populations for surveys and interviews. No children (aged under 18 years old) were surveyed or interviewed, for ethical reasons. Fewer Bangladeshi and Afghan women were surveyed. However, given that a larger proportion of most groups smuggled are men, women are likely to be over-represented in the sample relative to the proportion of the smuggled population.

The survey sample is therefore not intended to be interpreted as fully representative, and the in-depth interviews are included as indicative of individual experiences and for contextualization of findings from other sources.

Desk-based research carried out for this StoryMap drew on publicly available material, including reports by international organizations and non-governmental organizations, academic articles and studies and other relevant published work. The desk research also included analysis of data sources provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank and other organizations. Where relevant, data was analysed and used to triangulate and substantiate main points of the research.

End Notes

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- ⁵ International Labour Organization (ILO), "TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note" (July-Sep 2023): www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/genericdocument/wcms_647658.pdf.
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- ¹⁴ UNHCR, Myanmar Situation Operational Data Portal: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar> (accessed 17 January 2024).
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- ¹⁹ Myanmar's citizenship policies have gradually excluded Rohingya since Ne Win's Coup in 1962. The 1982 Citizenship Law states that full citizenship is primarily based on membership of the 'national races' - groups considered by the state to have settled in Myanmar prior to 1824, the date of first occupation by the British. Despite the Rohingyas being present then, they did not qualify, rendering them stateless. See also: Gerhard Hoffstaedter, "People Smuggling in Southeast Asia" (2023); UNODC, *Migrant Smuggling in Asia and the Pacific* (2018); Steve Kwok-Leung Chan, "Deprivation of Citizenship, Undocumented Labor and Human Trafficking: Myanmar Migrant Workers in Thailand" *Regions and Cohesion* 8:2 (2018); OHCHR, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar - Advance Unedited Version*, A/78/527 (12 October

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²⁵ Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), "Protection Risks for Rohingya Women and Children: From Departure Country to Arrival in Malaysia", 4MI snapshot (Geneva, MMC, 2022). Available at: <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/protection-risks-for-rohingya-women-and-children-from-departure-country-to-arrival-in-malaysia>.

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³² MY_KI_HY9 (key informant interview, Malaysia, 2023); UNODC, *Migrant Smuggling in Asia and the Pacific* (2018); UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in East Asia and the Pacific: A Threat Assessment* (2013); Choo Low and Khairiah Mokhtar, "Migration Control in Malaysia: Shifting Toward Internal Enforcement", *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* (2017).

³³ MY_KI_HY1; MY_KI_HY3; MY_KI_HY9 (key informant interviews, Malaysia, 2023).

³⁴ Mutasim Billah Mubde and others, *The Hidden Costs of Migration: Evaluating the Bangladesh-Malaysia Corridor* (Little Rock and D.C., Winrock, 2022).

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- ⁶⁶ UNODC, *Migrant Smuggling in Asia and the Pacific* (2018).
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- ⁷⁰ IND_KI_HY1 (key informant interview, Indonesia, 2023). In Indonesia, migrant workers should register with an Indonesian Migrant Worker Placement Agency (P3MI) according to an official list, and pay a service fee, which is intended to be borne by the employer but is often deducted from the worker's salary. See: www.bp2mi.go.id/pptkis/indeks.
- ⁷¹ G2G refers to the series of government-to-government agreements between Bangladesh and Malaysia, starting with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2012, to manage labour migration from Bangladesh to work on plantations in Malaysia. This culminated in the "G2G Plus" programme during 2015-2018, under which over 300,000 Bangladeshis migrated to Malaysia to work in various sectors, before recruitment of Bangladeshis was again banned by the Malaysian Government in September 2018 due to irregularities in the system. In December 2021, the two countries signed a new MoU on labour migration. See: Billah Mubde, Mutasim, et al. "The Hidden Costs of Migration: Evaluating the Bangladesh-Malaysia Corridor" (Little Rock and D.C., Winrock, 2022): https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Final-Draft_JDR3-Report.pdf.
- ⁷² UNODC, *Corruption as a Facilitator of Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons* (2021).
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁴ TH_MYN_SB2 (migrant interview, Thailand, 2023)
- ⁷⁵ TH_KI_SB2; TH_KI_SB3; TH_KI_SB4; TH_KI_SB9 (key informant interviews, Thailand, 2023).
- ⁷⁶ TH_MYN_SB3 (migrant interview, Thailand, 2023)
- ⁷⁷ These cases have also been covered by the Malaysian media, e.g. *The New Straits Times*; *The Star*; *The Straits Times*; *Sinar Daily*. The Malaysian Tourism Minister was quoted as referring to a "culture of corruption" among some Immigration Officials at KLIA.
- ⁷⁸ UNODC, *Corruption as a Facilitator of Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons* (2021).
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- ⁸² TH_KI_SB5; MY_KI_HY7 (key informant interviews, Thailand and Malaysia, 2023); Andika Ab Wahab and Aziat Khairi, "Smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia" (2020).
- ⁸³ Andika Ab Wahab and Aziat Khairi, "Smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia" (2020).
- ⁸⁴ On this, see: Federico Varese, *Mafias on the move: How organized crime conquers new territories* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011).
- ⁸⁵ IND_KI_HY1 (key informant interview, Indonesia, 2023).
- ⁸⁶ MY_KI_HY2; MY_KI_HY3; MY_KI_HY7 (key informant interviews, Malaysia, 2023).
- ⁸⁷ UNODC, *The Hawala System: Its operations and misuse by opiate traffickers and migrant smugglers* (Vienna, UNODC, 2023): www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/Hawala_Digital.pdf; Rhys Thompson

"“Underground banking” and Myanmar’s changing *hundi* system," *Journal of Money Laundering Control* (2019): <https://ideas.repec.org/a/eme/jmlcpp/jmlc-04-2018-0030.html>.

⁸⁸ Mixed Migration Centre, “Journeys to Indonesia for Rohingya Refugees: Routes, Risks, Assistance and Needs” (2022).

⁸⁹ TH_CAM_FI01; TH_CAM_SB1 (migrant interviews, Thailand, 2023); UNODC, *Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants* (Vienna, UNODC, 2018): www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/GLOSOM_2018_web_small.pdf.

⁹⁰ Amounts converted as per www.xe.com on 27 October 2023. Original currencies mentioned include Afghan Afghani (AFN); Bangladeshi Taka (BDT); Indonesian Rupiah (IDR); Malaysian Ringgit (MYR); Myanmar Kyat (MMK); Thai Baht (THB); and Vietnamese Đồng (VND).

⁹¹ UNODC, *The Hawala System: Its operations and misuse by opiate traffickers and migrant smugglers* (2023). Two Afghans interviewed for this research paid through *hawala* after they arrived in Jakarta, to the Afghan agent in Kabul (Afghanistan). An Afghan man interviewed in Malaysia also paid the first instalment in cash, and the second through *hawala*, to be released to the smuggler after he arrived in Kuala Lumpur.

⁹² See, e.g., Claire Healy, *The Strength to Carry On: Resilience and Vulnerability to Trafficking and Other Abuses among People Travelling along Migration Routes to Europe* (Vienna, ICMPD, 2016); Mandić, D., “Trafficking and Syrian refugee smuggling: Evidence from the Balkan route,” *Social Inclusion*. 5 (2): 28-38 (2017); GMDAC, *Assessing the Risks of Migration along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean Routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries* (Geneva, IOM, 2016); ICMPD, *Targeting Vulnerabilities: The Impact of the Syrian War and Refugee Situation on Trafficking in Persons - A Study of Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq* (Vienna, ICMPD, 2015); Optimity Advisors, ICMPD and ECRE, *A study on smuggling of migrants: Characteristics, responses and cooperation with third countries. Final Report* (Brussels, European Commission, 2015).

⁹³ It should be kept in mind that men may be less likely to report sexual violence.

⁹⁴ UNODC, *Abused and Neglected: A Gender Perspective on Aggravated Migrant Smuggling Offences and Response* (Vienna, UNODC, 2021).

⁹⁵ OHCHR, *A/78/527: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar - Advance Unedited Version* (12 October 2023).

⁹⁶ UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, "Desperate Journeys: Rohingya Refugees in Search of Protection. Rohingya Refugees Fleeing Over Land and Sea – Quarterly Update" (31 August 2023): <https://reporting.unhcr.org/bangladesh-rohingya-refugees-fleeing-over-land-and-sea-quarterly-update>; Gerhard Hoffstaedter, “People Smuggling in Southeast Asia” (2023).

⁹⁷ UNODC, *Abused and Neglected: A Gender Perspective on Aggravated Migrant Smuggling* (2021).

⁹⁸ For comparison, research conducted by MMC in 2021-2022 among 445 women in Malaysia indicated that smugglers were often perpetrators of abuses (77% reported this), while 42% cited military/police officials, and 24% cited border guards. See: Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), “Protection Risks for Rohingya Women and Children: From Departure Country to Arrival in Malaysia”, 4Mi snapshot (Geneva, MMC, 2022): <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/protection-risks-for-rohingya-women-and-children-from-departure-country-to-arrival-in-malaysia>.

⁹⁹ For example, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Malaysia was threatened and subjected to physical violence by the smuggler - he had visible bruises at the time of the interview. A Rohingya man interviewed in Indonesia was beaten by smugglers, who threatened to throw smuggled women and men who were not able to pay the smuggling fees into the water.

¹⁰⁰ TH_KI_SB3; TH_KI_SB5 (key informant interviews, Thailand, 2023); Supang Chantavanich, Samarn Laodumrongchai and Christina Stringer, "Under the shadow: Forced labour among sea fishers in Thailand", *Marine Policy*, 68 (2016): 1-7: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308597X15003851.

¹⁰¹ MY_KI_HY2 (key informant interview, Malaysia, 2023); International Crisis Group, *Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh* (2023); UNODC, *Corruption as a Facilitator of Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons* (2021).

¹⁰² The full UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants Research Methodology is available to download at: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/som-observatory.html.

¹⁰³ See: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi.

This document is the offline version of the UNODC Observatory StoryMap 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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