

Beat: Miscellaneous

98 stranded Myanma migrants starve to death in Bay of Bengal

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USPA News - More than 90 Myanma (Burmese) migrants are believed to have died of dehydration and starvation after they became stranded in the Bay of Bengal off Sri Lanka, officials said on Friday, nearly a week after more than 30 others were rescued from their boat. The surviving migrants were rescued on February 16 after a local fishing vessel spotted a damaged wooden vessel about 250 nautical miles (465 kilometers) east of Panama on Sri Lanka's eastern coast.

Navy Offshore Patrol Vessel Sagara immediately launched a rescue mission and rescued 31 adults and one male child. On Friday, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said it believed more than 90 people who were on the vessel are believed to have died of dehydration and starvation during their journey that lasted almost two months after their engine broke down. The group had been without food for 21 days when they were rescued on February 16, just as their boat began to sink in the deep waters of the Bay of Bengal. Authorities believe the death toll may be as high as 98, but no bodies have been recovered as the survivors threw them into the sea after they died. All those who were rescued, including four who were in a critical condition, were rushed to Karapitiya Teaching Hospital in Sri Lanka and treated for acute dehydration. The UN Refugee Agency said the migrants are believed to be part of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar (Burma), where they have no citizenship, are subject to abuse and forced labor, and cannot travel, marry or practice their religion. Sri Lankan authorities have said the Myanma government has refused to respond to repeated requests regarding the rescued migrants. "UNHCR is greatly saddened by this latest terrible ordeal, and commends the quick action of the Sri Lankan navy in rescuing this group and providing immediate medical attention," said Andrej Mahecic, a spokesman for the agency, during a news conference in Geneva on Friday. "UNHCR is ready to support the Sri Lankan authorities in assisting any among them who are in need of international protection." Mahecic said an estimated 13,000 people, many of them Rohingya, took to smugglers' boats in the Bay of Bengal in 2012, resulting in the deaths of nearly 500 people when their boats broke down or capsized. "It is clear that the Indian Ocean has become for people fleeing their countries one of the deadliest stretches of water in the world," he said. Violence in western Myanmar's Rakhine state erupted in June 2012 between different communities, leaving some 115,000 people - the majority of them Rohingya - uprooted. Many of them continue to be internally displaced within Rakhine state, but others have resorted to smugglers to flee their country.

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