

Why are Rohingya refugees risking their lives at sea?

Which are the countries that are currently seeing an influx of Rohingya refugees?

SUMEDA

THE GIST

- The Rohingya are a Muslim minority ethnic group with their roots in the Arakan kingdom in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. The Rohingya are culturally and religiously distinct from the majority Buddhist population in Myanmar.
- Myanmar has refused to recognise the Rohingya denying them citizenship since 1982, thus making them the world's largest stateless population.
- With the option of returning to Myanmar virtually impossible, an increasing number of Rohingya have been undertaking dangerous journeys across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea to Muslim-majority nations of Indonesia and Malaysia.

The story so far:

The dramatic rescue of dozens of Rohingya refugees from the Indian Ocean last week after a wooden boat capsized off the Indonesian coast has once again drawn attention to the plight of the refugees who are increasingly embarking on dangerous sea journeys to seek a better life. As per the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 4,500 Rohingya refugees set off on dangerous journeys across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea last year. Of these, 569 people lost their lives or went missing, marking the highest death toll since 2014.

Who are the Rohingya refugees?

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority ethnic group with their roots in the Arakan kingdom in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. The Rohingya are culturally and religiously distinct from the majority Buddhist population in Myanmar. The Rohingya claim to have lived in Myanmar's Rakhine State for generations, but successive governments in the country have disputed their ties, labelling them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Myanmar has refused to recognise them, denying

them citizenship since 1982, thus making them the world's largest stateless population devoid of fundamental rights and security.

Their largest exodus began in August 2017 when a massive wave of violence broke out in Rakhine, driving more than 7.5 lakh people to seek sanctuary in Bangladesh to escape the brutality of security forces. Entire villages were razed, families were torn apart, and severe human rights violations were reported. The United Nations has described the 2017 violence as "ethnic cleansing". A 2018 UN fact-finding commission claimed the Myanmar government had "genocidal" intent against the Rohingya.

Why sea journeys?

While over one million Rohingya have fled Myanmar since the 1990s, around six lakh remain in the country, mostly in camps for internally displaced people where their movements and livelihoods are restricted. An estimated 9,60,000 Rohingya, meanwhile, reside in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Most live near the Myanmar border in the Cox's Bazar, which has grown over the years to house some of the world's largest and most densely populated refugee camps. These overcrowded camps lack basic human necessities, forcing the Rohingya to live in harsh conditions. There is a shortage of food, access to water is inadequate, sanitation facilities are missing, healthcare is insufficient, and children are growing up without formal education.

Security conditions also have deteriorated over the years due to gang violence and an increase in arson attacks in camps. Over 60 Rohingya were killed in Bangladeshi camp clashes in 2023. With the option of returning to Myanmar virtually impossible, and worsening conditions in relief camps in Bangladesh, an increasing number of Rohingya have been undertaking dangerous journeys across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea to Muslim-majority nations of Indonesia and Malaysia. However, human traffickers exploit their desperation, charging exorbitant amounts to ferry them on rickety boats from Bangladesh to Indonesia. The treacherous voyages with inadequate space and in the absence of basic supplies take weeks and sometimes stretch into months. Horrifying accounts of abuse during the journey, including violence against women, have been recorded. Many do not survive the journey.

What about the rising death toll?

The UN estimates that one in eight Rohingya who take the sea route die or disappear in the attempt, making the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal among the deadliest stretches of water in the world. Last year, the number of people embarking on sea journeys increased by 21%. The UNHCR reported a 63% increase in deaths or disappearances compared to 2022. The report also highlighted the significant spike in the number of Rohingya arriving in Indonesia via sea in recent years. The number of Rohingya refugees that arrived in Indonesia increased by 1,261% between 2021 and 2023. While 64% of the refugee boats docked in Indonesia last year, compared to 22% in 2022, only one boat carrying 83 individuals reached Malaysia, according to UNHCR data.