

DENIED WORK, ROHINGYA TRAPPED IN LIMBO IN MALAYSIA

FLEEING PERSECUTION AT HOME, THOUSANDS OF ROHINGYA LAND IN MALAYSIA

KUALA LUMPUR: The first time he tried to escape a tough existence in his village in western Myanmar in 2004, Junaid Zafar was thrown in jail for five years. Like many other Rohingya Muslims, Zafar was seeking to flee poverty and persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and he did not wait long after being released from jail to try again. This time, his parents sold off possessions to raise about \$1,000 to pay people smugglers to take him to Malaysia. Zafar, the eldest of three siblings, finally made it in 2011. But like thousands of other Rohingya in Malaysia, he now finds himself living in a precarious limbo, having to work illegally due to official restrictions, and with resettlement to another country where he could lead a more stable life a distant dream.

"I have been here for five years, some other refugees have been here for 10 years. I feel like I am wasting my life," the tall, slender man, now 31, said. Zafar - like some 150,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in Malaysia, mainly from Myanmar - does not have formal status in the country as Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention. The govern-

ment considers them to be illegal migrants. Now there is a glimmer of hope for the many Rohingya and other refugees living in Malaysia, as authorities make a renewed effort to try to improve their access to work.

Dirty, difficult, dangerous

The government has in the past said it would consider allowing refugees to work but details and implementation had been sketchy. Some officials feared a relaxation of the policy would lead to an influx of migrant workers. But this month the creation of a government-led task force was announced to handle refugee registration issues. Malaysian Deputy Home Minister Nur Jazlan Mohamed told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that the task force would also look into the possibility of opening up the job market for refugees and allowing refugee children formal education. "(The task force) will look into issues of refugees in Malaysia, which include the Rohingya, in a more comprehensive manner," he said in a telephone interview.

"It will decide on the recognition of

these people first and then decide on the short-, medium- and long-term solution for them including job and education opportunities," he said. While the refugees are recognized by the UN's refugee agency UNHCR, Malaysia does not extend protection, job opportunities or education to them, as it is not party to the refugee convention. Barred from working officially, many refugees end up finding odd jobs as cleaners, or working in restaurants or on construction sites. The country relies heavily on foreign laborers for jobs shunned by Malaysians in what is known as the "3D" - dirty, difficult and dangerous - industries.

But the lack of a formal status often leaves refugees vulnerable to exploitation, said lawyer Andrew Khoo, a co-chairperson of the human rights committee at the Malaysian Bar, the country's main legal professional body.

"As long as the government doesn't recognize their status, let alone the ability to access work legally, they are susceptible to abuse, exploitation and mistreatment," Khoo said. A conference in Bangkok this week as part of the so-called Bali process on people smuggling and trafficking, will

gather experts and officials to discuss ways to absorb refugees in Southeast Asia into the legal workforce.

'It's not easy'

For Zafar, he said even when he managed to find a job, usually as a waiter in restaurants, his wage is only half of what other migrant workers get, and that he can be dismissed at any time. "Sometimes I have a job, sometimes I don't.

You never know, it's not easy," he told Thomson Reuters Foundation at a Rohingya community centre in Ampang, a neighborhood that is home to many refugees and a short drive from downtown Kuala Lumpur. At the restaurant, he is paid about 30 Malaysian ringgit (\$7.50) for a 12 hour-shift.

On a few occasions, the restaurant owners refused to pay him, but he had no legal recourse and had to look for new jobs, he said. Without a formal status, other refugees Thomson Reuters Foundation spoke to also described harassment from law enforcement officials, who demand bribes or threaten arrests.

Other challenges they face include

paying for medical treatment or even just finding a place to rent. In an open-air market in Ampang, where refugees gather in the evening, another Rohingya Muhammad Ayub has been working as a tailor since arriving in Malaysia four years ago. He worked from home in the beginning but was later given a job at a shop by a sympathetic employer. "I am grateful I can find work and send money home. Although when the local authorities come for their routine check, we have to pull down the shutter straight away and run," Ayub said.

Zafar said he could not face going home, but looked forward to the day he could resettle in another country, and bring his parents and siblings there. "I want to go back to my village but our situation hasn't improved," he said of the new Myanmar government led by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party. For the time being, Zafar said he was hoping to get a stable job in Malaysia, and perhaps one day, he said with a shy grin, he would be able to bring his childhood sweetheart from his village to a better country and marry her. — Reuters

TYPHOON LIONROCK SLAMS INTO JAPAN'S NORTHEAST

TOKYO: A strong typhoon slammed into northeastern Japan yesterday, dumping heavy rain and generating high waves that caused flooding along the Pacific coast. Typhoon Lionrock made landfall near the city of Ofunato shortly before 6 pm, the Japan Meteorological Agency said, after moving up Japan's Pacific Ocean coastline. Packing wind gusts up to 162 kilometers per hour, the storm was moving northwest at 50 kilometers per hour, it said.

It is the first typhoon to directly land in the region from the Pacific Ocean since the country's present weather observation system was introduced in 1951, the agency said. Typhoons usually approach Japan from the south and southwest before moving northward across the archipelago. While there were no official reports of casualties, local media reported some minor injuries, such as a fall by a 40-year-old woman in strong winds.

Authorities warned of landslides and high water due to expected heavy rain of up to eight centimeters per hour. Landfall, which came at high tide, brought flooding along the coast.

Television footage showed local residents struggling to walk amid water above their knees in the city of Miyako, where some cars were half-submerged and some 600 people were advised to evacuate. Miyako was one of the northeastern coastline cities hit in March 2011 by a deadly tsunami generated by a massive magnitude 9.0 offshore earthquake, which also triggered meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Local authorities were

using heavy machinery to pile huge sandbags along the coast in a bid to hold back raging waves, as they opened up some public buildings for use as shelters. Schools were closed across the affected area, broadcasters reported.

At the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, efforts were made to secure construction cranes and equipment from violent winds, operator Tokyo Electric Power Co said. Some sensitive decommissioning work was suspended, they added. The typhoon was affecting manufacturing and travel, with Toyota suspending production at two of its plants in the region, the company said, though added they were expected to restart today. Some 120 domestic flights have also been cancelled, public broadcaster NHK said. In the northern part of the country, some Shinkansen super fast bullet trains were suspended.

Lionrock comes on the heels of two others that hit Japan in the past nine days, resulting in two deaths, the cancellation of hundreds of domestic flights and disruptions to train services. Formed more than 10 days ago, it has become the longest-lasting typhoon of those that have developed north of the 30th parallel north, breaking a 46-year-old record, according to the private Weathernews agency. The previous record-holding typhoon in that category was in 1970, which survived for nine days and six hours, Weathernews said on its website. Lionrock was expected to cut across Japan's main island of Honshu and head out to sea towards Russia and China, according to the weather agency. — AFP



MANILA: Philippine Scene of the Crime Operatives (SOCO) work at the scene where two suspects were shot dead following an encounter and shootout with police at a checkpoint along a highway in Manila. More than 2,000 people have died violent deaths since Duterte took office two months ago and immediately implemented his scorched-earth plans to eradicate drugs in society, ordering police to shoot dead traffickers and urging ordinary citizens to kill addicts. — AFP

'ALLEGED DRUG LORD' SHOT DEAD BY PHILIPPINE POLICE

BUSINESSMAN AND WIFE KILLED, FUELLING CONCERNS

MANILA: A Philippine businessman and his wife were shot dead after the police chief branded him a drug lord, authorities said yesterday, fuelling concerns about extrajudicial killings in President Rodrigo Duterte's crime war. More than 2,000 people have been killed since Duterte was sworn into office two months ago and immediately launched a law-and-order crackdown, with the United States, the United Nations and rights groups voicing alarm at the bloodshed.

On Monday, Melvin Odicia, a businessman accused of being a drug trafficker known as "Dragon", and his wife were shot dead at Aklan port in the central Philippines after getting off a ferry, police reported. Regional police chief Jose Gentiles said yesterday the lone gunman had yet to be identified, but was likely also linked to the

drug trade. "The most probable motive is that the mastermind wanted to silence the couple. Perhaps the mastermind was afraid the victims would implicate them," Gentiles said. Odicia had expressed fears for his life after local authorities alleged he was the top drug lord in the central province of Iloilo, according to his lawyer.

Odicia had said he was innocent but national police chief Ronald dela Rosa insisted last week he was the drug lord. "Who is he fooling? You know he is the drug lord but he is still denying it? Tell it to the Marines," dela Rosa told reporters on Friday in Iloilo.

Duterte has repeatedly said that drug traffickers deserve to die and urged security forces to kill them. During the election campaign he promised that 100,000 people would die in his war on crime. However he said in recent weeks

that his security forces are not carrying out extrajudicial killings. Police have reported killing more than 700 people they accused of being involved in drugs.

But police and Duterte say they have only killed in self-defense. Dela Rosa said last week there were another 1,190 killings under investigation, but they were likely due to drug gangs murdering people who could implicate each other. Critics of the crime war say security forces and hired assassins are carrying out mass murder, with people not involved in drugs also being killed amid a dire breakdown in the rule of law. Duterte has railed against his critics, accusing them of siding with drug traffickers, and warned there will be no let up. "I consider the fight against drugs a war. There is a crisis in this country," Duterte said on Monday. — AFP



MIYAGI: Waves crash against a coastal road in Minamisanku, Miyagi prefecture, northeastern Japan yesterday. — AP

MYANMAR'S SUU KYI TO HOLD MAJOR PEACE SUMMIT WITH ETHNIC REBELS

NAYPYITAW: Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi is launching a major push to end decades of fighting between rebels and the military, with many of the country's myriad armed groups gathering for a peace conference in the capital Naypyitaw. Suu Kyi has made the peace process a priority for her administration, which faces sky-high expectations at home and abroad after sweeping to power in an election last November to end more than half a century of military-backed rule.

Few concrete proposals are to emerge this week, with delegates expecting to meet every six months to tackle issues ranging from security, political representation and culture to sharing the fruits of the country's mineral riches.

But the fact that Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi has been able to bring the vast majority of the rebels to the negotiating table only five months after taking power is a sign of progress, experts say.

Powerful armed groups from regions bordering China, who refused to sign a ceasefire last October under the previous military-backed government, are now set to take part, partly owing to China's tacit sup-

port for the talks, observers say. As Myanmar's economy opens up, China is vying for influence with the United States. President Xi Jinping pledged his country would play a "constructive role" in the peace process when Suu Kyi visited China this month. Myanmar has been torn by fighting between the military, which seized power in the 1962 coup, and ethnic armed groups almost without a break since the end of the Second World War, as rebels pushed for recognition of their rights and greater autonomy from the central government.

The meeting, which begins on Wednesday, has been billed as the "21st-Century Panglong Conference", a reference to the agreement between the majority Bamar and ethnic minorities in 1947 that formed the Union of Burma. It was held by Suu Kyi's father and Myanmar's national hero, General Aung San. "The ambition of 1947 Panglong Conference was to get independence. Today's ambition is domestic peace and unity of the whole country," said 84-year-old veteran journalist Phoe Thauk Kyar, who was 14 at the time of the Panglong Conference. — Reuters

PHILIPPINE MILITARY RAMPS UP ABU SAYYAF OFFENSIVE

JOLO: The Philippine military deployed thousands of extra troops yesterday to destroy an Islamic extremist group notorious for kidnapping foreigners, after 15 soldiers were killed, authorities said. President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered his security forces to wipe out the Abu Sayyaf, which has declared allegiance to the Islamic State group and recently beheaded two Canadian hostages. But an assault that began last week on the heavily forested island of Jolo, one of the Abu Sayyaf's strongholds about 900 kilometers south of Manila, has met fierce resistance. Fifteen troops were killed and another 10 were injured in a single encounter with the Abu Sayyaf on Monday, regional military spokesman Major Filemon Tan said.

An additional 2,500 troops were yesterday deployed to Jolo and nearby islands, according to presidential spokesman Ernesto Abella. "The president is focused on making sure that the threat from the Abu Sayyaf group should be terminated as soon as possible," Abella told reporters in Manila. Tan said the extra troops would join two brigades already involved in the fighting. He declined to give specific numbers, but there are at least 1,000 soldiers in a brigade. Tan said the military would be able to achieve the goal set by Duterte, but conceded the rough terrain and possible assistance from local Muslim residents were working to the Abu Sayyaf's advantage.

Duterte, who has been in office for two months, initially called on the Abu Sayyaf to lay down their arms but quickly adopted a tougher

stance when his overtures were rejected. "Go out and destroy them. Kill whoever they are," Duterte said last week, in reference to the Abu Sayyaf. The Abu Sayyaf is a loose network of a militants formed in the 1990s with seed money from Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. It is based in remote Muslim populated southern islands of the mainly Catholic Philippines, and has earned

millions of dollars from kidnappings-for-ransom.

While its leaders have in recent years pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group, analysts say the group is mainly focused on a lucrative kidnapping business rather than religious ideology. This year the militants beheaded two Canadians after their demands for millions of dollars in ransoms were rejected. — AFP



MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte salutes during a wreath-laying ceremony at the National Heroes' Cemetery as part of commemorations for National Heroes' Day in Manila. — AFP