

International

Rohingya man narrates his incredible reunion with 'dead wife and daughter'

In-depth probes reveals shocking human trafficking of the Rohingya

LHOKSEUMAWE, Indonesia: Weeks after a funeral for the wife and daughter he thought had died at sea trying to reach him, Nemah Shah was stunned when he saw online images of them emerging from a refugee boat in Indonesia.

What followed was an incredible reunion story retold during an in-depth investigation into human trafficking of the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority group driven out of Myanmar. As he was still grieving the loss of his family, Shah said he was astonished to see his wife and daughter among a boatload of 100 Rohingya refugees who landed near the Indonesian town of Lhokseumawe in June. "When I recognized my wife and daughter," Shah said, referring to the online images, "it was the happiest day of my life."

Video and photos taken of the landing by international media, including AFP, showed Shah's wife and daughter among those getting out of a rickety boat pulled to shore by concerned locals.

Shah was in Malaysia, where at least 100,000 Rohingya people live as refugees, working as a laborer in the construction industry earning the equivalent of \$500 a month. The arrival of the boat was huge news in the Rohingya community there and Shah, 24, watched the footage online.

Through the Rohingya network, Shah was eventually able to connect with his wife, Majuma, by mobile phone. The call lasted just a few minutes. It was enough for Shah to promptly quit his job and start making plans to get to Indonesia.

Months later, and against all odds, Shah was reunited with Majuma and their six-year-old daughter Fatima, living together in their new home—a makeshift cubicle in former school buildings in Lhokseumawe that Indonesian authorities have turned into a camp for the refugees.

Never see her again

Rohingya have for decades endured persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, where they are not recognized as citizens, and smuggling routes out by land and sea have long existed. Shah said he fled Myanmar six years ago, ending up in relatively affluent and Muslim-majority Malaysia.

He left behind Majuma and his then infant daughter. They too soon escaped Myanmar, but only across the border into neighbouring Bangladesh where they joined a million Rohingya living in dire conditions in refugee camps.

After years of saving tiny amounts that Shah was able to send back to Bangladesh, Majuma was able to pay people smugglers for a spot on a boat to Malaysia. But while traffickers promise their passengers will make the roughly 4,000-kilometre (2,500-mile) journey to Malaysia in a week, the reality can be months at sea, without even making it there—or worse. More than 200 are believed to have died at sea this year, according to the UN's refugee agency, with starvation, illness, dehydration and beatings by the smugglers among the reasons. Majuma and Fatima left in February. But after Shah



Rohingya migrant Nemah Shah (left) with his six-year-old daughter Nosmin Fatimah and his wife Majuma (right) after being reunited at a temporary shelter in Lhokseumawe in Aceh province. —AFP

did not hear from them for months, he gave up hope and held a funeral ceremony.

"I told myself I would never get married again and always remember them," he said.

Inside the Lhokseumawe refugee camp, hundreds of Rohingya anxiously wait for news about their future. Like the others, the newly reunited

family is reliant on handouts and unable to travel—far cry from the hoped-for life in Malaysia.

"Sometimes it upsets me because I had freedom in Malaysia. I could work," Shah said. But reuniting with his wife and daughter trumped all else. "By the grace of God, I found them here at the camp and we're now reunited." —AFP

Rohingya women face odyssey of misery

KUTUPALONG, Bangladesh: Stay in a squalid refugee camp—hopeless, starving, and made to feel a burden—or leave, risking death, rape, human trafficking and months at sea to reach a husband you've never met. This is the bleak choice many Rohingya women, already scarred from fleeing violent persecution in Myanmar, are now facing.

As conditions deteriorate in increasingly overcrowded Bangladeshi refugee camps, desperate parents are marrying off their daughters to Rohingya men thousands of kilometers (miles) away in Malaysia. Wed by phone or video apps, the girls have little say in such unions and rely on occasional calls to build a relationship with their new partners as they begin treacherous journeys to reach them. "My parents kept asking me to find a way to reach Malaysia—living with them, I was just an extra mouth to feed," explained Jannat Ara, talking about her marriage to Nur Alam, a Rohingya man who lives in Kuala Lumpur.

She has seven other siblings, and the family had to share and survive on twice-monthly 25-kilogram (55-pound) rations of rice. Ara has never met the man she married via phonecall from the refugee camp but, after mounting pressure from relatives to seek him out, decided to leave.

She is one of the thousands of Rohingya, who are



In this file photo, Rohingya women wait in line to have their fingerprints taken as they go through identification procedures by Indonesian police at the immigration detention center in Lhokseumawe in Indonesia's North Aceh Regency. —AFP

stateless and cannot travel abroad legally, forced to put their faith in husbands they don't know and the people smugglers paid to transport them.

Her clandestine route took her via rickshaw to port, and from a small boat to a packed, dilapidated trawler. But Malaysia denied it entry and "after floating at sea for two months and seeing many people die, we returned to the place where we started," the 20-year-old told AFP from the Bangladeshi camps. Arranged marriages are part of Rohingya custom, but in the Bangladeshi refugee

camps, families have little income and struggle to afford the traditional dowries required.

Virtual weddings and international betrothals can seem an ideal solution. At just 18, Somuda Begum was regarded as getting "too old" for marriage by relatives, and while proposals came from some families within the camp, they all demanded "a lot of money". "My parents couldn't fix my marriage as my old father barely had any money to pay for a wedding. So he thought it would be better to send me to Malaysia instead," she said. —AFP

Careless talk costs lives: A North Korean execution

SEOUL: As a teenager in North Korea, Lee Soon-keum bitterly resented her prisoner-of-war father as his status meant she would have to toil in coal mines like him. Years later, she says she was forced to watch him and her brother executed by firing squad.

After the Korean War ended in 1953, North Korea kept tens of thousands of the South's captured troops, putting them to work in its mines and construction sites. Escapees and activists say their descendants have inherited their fate, condemned to labor digging coal—a major earner for Pyongyang until sanctions blocked exports. Growing up in Kyonghung in the country's far northwest, Lee knew from an early age that like almost all POW daughters—she would be sent to the mines for seven years after she left school.

"When I was 13, I found out that my father was a POW and I really resented him for it," she said.

"I asked him why he didn't get killed in the war so that he wouldn't have met my mother and given birth to us," Lee, who defected to the South in 2010 and now lives in Seoul, told AFP that her father's longing to return to his South Korean home town of Pohang proved his undoing.

He regularly sang its praises to her and her siblings, telling them that they would be welcomed there as "the children of a hero" when the peninsula was reunified. But her brother—also assigned to work in the mine—repeated his boasts at a drinking session with workmates, one of whom reported them to authorities. One evening six months later, security personnel arrived at the family home and dragged away Lee's brother. A few weeks later they returned for her father.

She heard nothing more, until one day guards took her—without explanation—to a patch of wasteland by a bridge where a crowd had been assembled. A jeep arrived carrying the two men, who looked weak and as if they had been beaten. "My brother had shrunk like a child and my father had dried up like a twig," Lee said. An official denounced them as traitors before they were tied to two posts set up in the earth.

Teams of three executioners shot both of them



North Korean defector Lee Soon-keum, daughter of a South Korean POW, says she bitterly resented her father for being a Southern prisoner of war because she would have to toil in coal mines like him. —AFP

dead. Lee's mind has blocked out the moment when they were killed, but she locked eyes with her father in the last seconds of his life, and breaks down at the memory. "As my father stared at me," she said, "it seemed like he was telling me to go back to his hometown." —AFP

their best to board-up windows and storefronts, while others lugged bags filled with vital provisions through already flooded streets. National Disaster Management Office director Vasiti Soko urged anyone who doubted their home's structural integrity to prioritize survival over protecting their property and escape right away.

"If you need to move to an evacuation center, we are pleading that you move before it gets dark," Soko said. "If you know that your house cannot survive strong winds, let alone the cat five cyclone that is on the way, please take yourselves, your children and your valuables to the evacuation centre."

Soko said Cyclone Yasa was likely to have a larger impact than Cyclone Harold in April this year, another Category Five storm that gouged a trail of destruction across the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga.

Category Five cyclones were once rare but have become more common in recent years, with Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama among those blaming the trend on climate change. "We can see



Fijians living in the path of an approaching super cyclone were told to hunker down at home or flee to emergency shelters immediately yesterday.

the eye (of Cyclone Yasa) and the area that's of concern—it's not just part of Fiji like Harold, it's the whole of Fiji," Soko said. —AFP

News in brief

HK civil servants make loyalty oaths

HONG KONG: Hong Kong civil servants swore a new pledge of allegiance to the government yesterday in the first ceremony overseen by the city's leader to enforce greater loyalty in the governing class after last year's huge democracy protests. Chief executive Carrie Lam stood before a group of senior officials at a closed-door ceremony for the pledge, which all the finance hub's 180,000 civil servants will be expected to make in the coming weeks. Those taking the oath promise to uphold Hong Kong's mini-constitution and "bear allegiance" to the city and its government. A government spokesperson said the oath-taking would "strengthen the public's confidence in political-appointed officials".

Fosun to buy 100m BioNTech doses

BEIJING: A Chinese pharmaceutical company said yesterday it had agreed to buy at least 100 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine from German company BioNTech, subject to Beijing approving its use. China has been rapidly developing its own Covid-19 vaccine candidates and ramping up production facilities, but local firms have also been partnering with foreign developers to supply the world's most populous country. Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group said its subsidiary had entered into an agreement with the German firm aimed at ensuring "an adequate supply" of vaccines in China, adding it will make an initial payment of 125 million euros (\$152 million) before year-end for 50 million doses. —AFP

El Salvador implementing migration rules

WASHINGTON: The US Department of Homeland Security said Tuesday that El Salvador has begun implementing an immigration scheme that allows people seeking asylum at the US border to be transferred instead to that dangerous Central American nation. The controversial measure known as the Asylum Cooperative Agreement (ACA) helps establish a "regional approach to migration" while also offering "protection to those migrants who are victims of persecution," said Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf. The measure affects "certain migrants requesting asylum or similar humanitarian protection at the US border," who then "will be transferred to El Salvador" according to a DHS statement. —AFP

US sets new 24-hour record infections

WASHINGTON: The US set a new daily record of COVID-19 cases Tuesday, with more than 248,000 infections registered in the past 24 hours, the Johns Hopkins University virus monitor reported. In the same period, 2,706 new deaths were recorded, according to data compiled by AFP based on information released by the university. Coronavirus infections have increased dramatically over the past month in the United States—new daily cases have been recorded at or above the 200,000 mark in 10 of the past 13 days. The number of hospitalized COVID patients — 113,000 — is also at its highest level since the beginning of the pandemic in March, according to data from the US Department of Health and Human Services. —AFP