



THAILAND

Inside Thailand's hunt for human traffickers

Bangkok launched a sweeping investigation into human trafficking after the discovery of mass graves along the Thailand-Malaysia border. Now the crackdown is running into daunting obstacles.

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Sheltering in the backroom of a provincial Thai police station is a 35-year-old street vendor who triggered a human trafficking investigation that has reverberated across Southeast Asia.

He is a Rohingya Muslim, a mostly stateless group from western Myanmar. He had scraped a living for the past decade selling fried bread, or roti, from a push cart in Nakhon Si Thammarat, a city in southern Thailand.

Then his nephew fell into the hands of murderous human traffickers.

The roti seller's desperate bid to save him ultimately led to the discovery of scores of jungle graves on the Thai-Malaysia border in May and sparked a regional crisis over boatloads of unwanted Rohingyas.

Now the roti seller fears traffickers could target him. His new home in the police station is a primitive form of witness protection. (Reuters has withheld his identity at the request of police.)

His predicament raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of Thailand's crackdown on resilient and lucrative trafficking syndicates. Witnesses have been intimidated, police say. Key suspects are represented by lawyers with powerful political connections. And while 72 people have been arrested, police are still seeking many others.

Thailand's investigation comes ahead of a new U.S. report card on its anti-trafficking efforts, due out in mid-July. Police spearheading the campaign on the ground told Reuters they encountered official indifference about the evidence they had gathered on trafficking networks - even after the U.S. State Department identified Thailand in June 2014 as one of the world's worst trafficking offenders.

Katrina Adams, a spokeswoman for the State Department's East Asia and Pacific Bureau, said this year's report only covers the year to March 2015, and thus would



THE INVESTIGATOR: Police Major General Thatchai Pitaneelaboot (L) interviewing a Rohingya trafficking victim. **REUTERS/ANDREW RC MARSHALL.** RESCUED (cover): Rohingyas collect rainwater at a refugee camp in Myanmar's Rakhine state. They were rescued after drifting lost at sea for two months. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN.**

“If we want to eradicate human trafficking, we can't hide it. We must put it on the table.

Thatchai Pitaneelaboot

Police Major General

not include Thailand's latest crackdown.

“We welcome Thailand's law enforcement actions, including the arrests of dozens believed to be involved in migrant smuggling and abuses against migrants, which may include human trafficking, in southern Thailand,” Adams added.

INDIFFERENCE

Police Major General Thatchai Pitaneelaboot, who led early anti-trafficking efforts in southern Thailand was told his investigation was damaging Thailand's image, though he declined to be more specific about who was telling him that.

“No one cared,” he said.

Thatchai felt otherwise. “If we want to

eradicate human trafficking, we can't hide it. We must put it on the table.”

Deputy National Police Chief Aek Angsannanont, who is in charge of the anti-trafficking crackdown in Thailand, said the military government that came to power in a coup last May took the issue seriously.

“I don't know what the policy was of previous administrations,” Aek said. “I took up this trafficking issue under the military government and the military government has given this issue importance.”

After last year's coup, Thailand's military junta promised what it called a “zero tolerance” policy to human trafficking. Yet Thailand convicted fewer perpetrators of human trafficking last year than in 2013, according to the government's own anti-trafficking report.

Aek said he could not “give an opinion on this. But I can say that since the June 2014 (U.S. anti-trafficking) report, everyone woke up and has taken this issue seriously.”

The Thai crackdown has disrupted the region's trafficking infrastructure for now but some experts question how lasting that will be.

The investigation has "made trafficking in Thailand a bit harder," said Steve Galster, director of FREELAND Foundation, an anti-trafficking NGO that has given technical help to the Thai police. "The question remains, however, if anyone higher up the chain ... will be investigated." If that doesn't happen, Galster warned, "trafficking in this region will remain a big problem."

PREYING ON ROHINGYA

The trafficking syndicates have particularly preyed on the Rohingya, who are fleeing poverty and oppression in Myanmar. The number of people leaving on boats from Myanmar and Bangladesh has nearly tripled in three years – from 21,000 in 2012 to 58,000 last year, according to The Arakan Project, a Rohingya advocacy group based in Bangkok. Most of them came ashore in Thailand and were moved to trafficking camps.

The camps along the jungly border between Thailand and Malaysia had been exposed as early as 2013. But they became impossible to ignore in May after police from both countries found the graves of 175 suspected migrants at dozens of hastily vacated trafficking camps on both sides of the border.

The ensuing crackdown meant traffickers could no longer bring their human cargoes ashore so they simply abandoned them at sea. The boats eventually washed ashore in Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar, their passengers sick and thirsty. At least 1,200 remained stranded at sea, according to a June 16 United Nations report.

The roti seller, who Reuters interviewed at the police station, said his nephew fell into the hands of traffickers during last year's smuggling season.

Last October, he said his family paid 95,000 baht (\$2,800) in ransom money to

In Myanmar, a spiraling exodus but no trafficking arrests

The bamboo-and-thatch village of Nyaung Chaung in Myanmar's Rakhine State is typical of the places from which Rohingya Muslims flee. The fields don't provide a living, locals say. Jobs are scarce. Daily life is a series of humiliations from Myanmar's government, which officially considers them intruders and denies them citizenship.

Tens of thousands of Rohingya have fled Rakhine since the start of the year, joining perilous journeys on the boats of human traffickers through the Bay of Bengal.

But local officials say no one has been arrested for trafficking in the Myanmar state that supplies the vast majority of victims to this brutal trade.

“As far as I know, there hasn't been action against any human traffickers here.

San Min

Police Lieutenant

"There have been no trafficking cases in Rakhine State so far (this year). There is a police unit to track down human traffickers, so it's very rare in this area," Hla Thein, the Rakhine State Attorney General, told Reuters.

LOCAL MIDDLEMEN

Villagers give a very different account, linking local middlemen to a regional network that has been the subject of arrests abroad.

They say the link is a local man, Soe Naing - widely known as Anwar. His arrest in southern Thailand on April 28 led to the discovery of dozens of migrant graves along the Thailand-Malaysia border.

For years, Rohingya have fled poverty and persecution in Rakhine, boarding boats to Thailand, Malaysia and beyond to seek work

and asylum. But clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012 saw an explosion in the exodus, amid violence that killed hundreds and displaced more than 140,000.

As more than 100,000 fled, traffickers began holding migrants for ransom in jungle camps in Thailand and Malaysia. Untold numbers died on the journey.

In early May, Thailand began a sweeping crackdown on the trade after discovering scores of graves in abandoned trafficking camps along the Thailand-Malaysia border.

"BACK AND FORTH"

Since the crackdown, Anwar's family home – a rambling structure of bamboo and corrugated iron, slathered in sky blue paint – has stood empty behind a metal fence.

Local police have not yet paid a visit.

Police Lieutenant San Min is, the head of the anti-human trafficking unit in Maungdaw township, whose office is a 10-minute drive away. "As far as I know, there hasn't been action against any human traffickers here."

The reason for that may be that police have not regarded Rohingya fleeing the country as being trafficked, said Police Lt. Col. Thet Naung, the national head of the police Anti-Human Trafficking Team. They "were just going back and forth between regional countries, including Thailand, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar," he told Reuters.

He said Thai police had requested assistance in taking DNA samples from Rohingya in Rakhine state, as part of their efforts to investigate alleged murders inside Thai camps, including those linked to Anwar. Myanmar authorities are ready to cooperate with the request, Thet Naung said.

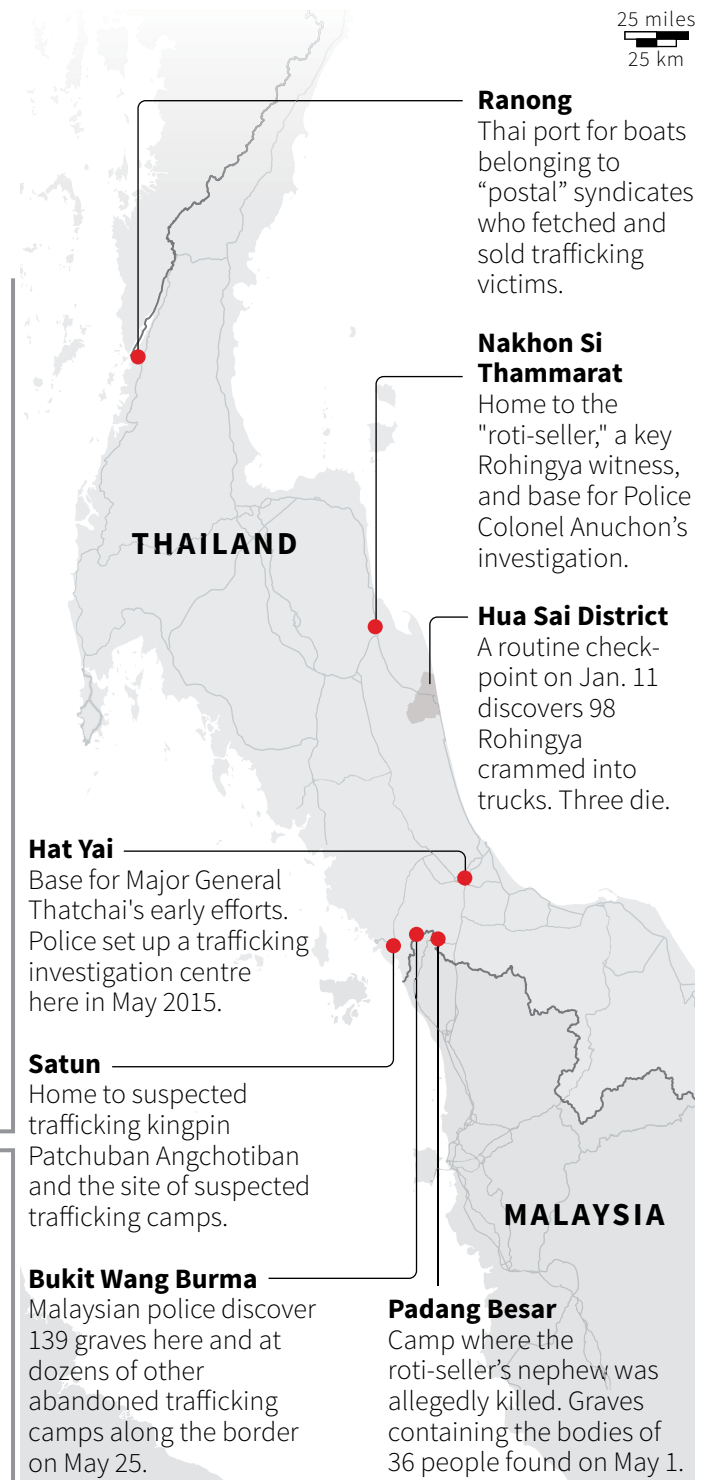
- Aubrey Belford

Hunting the traffickers

Southern Thailand's trafficking hub stretches from the mangrove-fringed shores of the Andaman Sea to its hilly frontier with Malaysia, where the graves of 175 suspected victims were unearthed in May.



Source: Reuters reporting



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free their 25-year-old nephew from a camp in southern Thailand. Traffickers typically held boat people for ransom and often tortured them until their relatives, who had settled in Thailand or Malaysia, paid up. Some of those whose relatives couldn't pay were left to die in the camps. Police say some were sold into slavery on Thai fishing boats.

Despite getting the ransom payment, the roti seller said the alleged operator of the camp his nephew was in, a Myanmar man known as Anwar, refused to release his nephew. It was unclear to him why.

So, two months later in December, the roti seller filed a complaint against Anwar with local police. "They didn't take me seriously," he said.

Police Colonel Anuchon Chamat, deputy commander of Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Police, admitted they were "not that interested" in the complaint at the time.

That was about to change.

TRANSPORTATION NETWORK

On Jan. 11, just before dawn, Anuchon's men intercepted five trucks at a routine checkpoint in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Hidden inside were 98 tired and malnourished Rohingya. One woman had suffocated to death; two more later died in hospital.

Police interviews with the survivors confirmed what the roti seller had described: "That there was buying and selling of humans," Anuchon said.

He said he sought help from the anti-trafficking group FREELAND, which analysed data from mobile phones seized from two of the truck drivers.

This helped Anuchon map out a transportation network that led from Ranong, a port city on the Andaman Sea, to jungle camps on the Malaysian border, an overnight's drive away. He concluded that the malnourished Rohingya and the roti seller's nephew were in thrall to the same syndicate. Bank transfer slips from the roti seller showed he had paid the money to suspected



GRISLY DISCOVERY: Thai police retrieve the remains of suspected victims of trafficking in southern Thailand. **REUTERS/DAMIR SAGOLJ.**



syndicate members.

Anuchon's discovery, however, was too late to save the roti seller's nephew.

On Jan. 27, camp guards called the roti seller and placed a phone to his nephew's face. The roti seller wept as he described what happened next. The traffickers, he said, had found out he had gone to the authorities. Anuchon confirmed the roti seller's story.

"They're going to kill me," his nephew said. "What did you do?"

The roti seller heard the phone drop and his nephew screaming. Then a voice said, "He's dead already", and the line was cut.

“They’re going to kill me.
What did you do?”

The roti seller, relating what his nephew told him over the phone at a trafficking camp.

INACTIVE INTELLIGENCE UNIT

Still, Anuchon did not think he had enough evidence to convince his superiors about the growing scale and sophistication of the trafficking networks. "We did not dare talk to Bangkok because our evidence was insufficient. If our information was wrong, we would have lost face with our bosses."

Yet one Thai police unit was well-placed to help monitor the Ranong-based syndicates, including the one that had held the roti seller's nephew captive. The Port Intelligence Unit in Ranong was set up in 2013, with help from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),

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REUTERS/RONI BINTANG

ABANDONED: Rohingya migrants (above) rest inside a shelter after being rescued from boats that washed ashore in Indonesia's Aceh province in May. Clothes hang on trees at an abandoned trafficking camp on the Malaysian side of the border where dozens of bodies were found. A migrant rescued from a boat that washed up in Indonesia's Aceh province, sleeps on the floor of a shelter.



REUTERS/DAMIR SAGOLJ



REUTERS/RONI BINTANG

to gather intelligence on people smuggling, human trafficking and transnational crime. But, lacking the go-ahead from Bangkok, it remained inactive.

The unit is “the right solution in the right place,” said Jeremy Douglas, the UNODC’s Regional Representative in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. “It has not become fully operational and it needs a (Thai) leadership push to get going.”

Aek, the deputy national police chief, declined to comment about the status of the unit.

SHALLOW GRAVES

After intercepting the truck convoy, Col. Anuchon enlisted the roti seller’s help in tracking down a Rohingya witness who had survived 10 months at the same camp as the nephew. At the request of police, Reuters has agreed not to reveal the survivor’s name for safety reasons.

The Rohingya survivor said Anwar, the alleged camp operator, had ordered the nephew killed. On April 28, police grabbed Anwar after staking out his house and took him to Nakhon Si Thammarat’s main police station.

The roti seller was already at the station, where earlier that day he had recounted how he had tried to tell police in four different cities about his nephew’s plight. Anwar, flanked by policemen, walked past him in a corridor. “I wanted to hit him for what he did to my nephew,” the roti seller said.

Anwar, 40, also known as Soe Naing from Myanmar’s Rakhine State, is himself a Rohingya. During an hour-long interview at the police station, Anwar insisted he was not a human trafficker, but a rubber tapper – and a roti seller himself.

“They say I killed. I am not worried. I did not do anything and I don’t know anything about this,” Anwar said. “I’m rich enough selling roti.”

Three days after Anwar’s arrest, the Rohingya survivor led police to the camp a few hundred metres from the Malaysian



BIG FISH: Lieutenant General Manus Kongpan, who surrendered to police on June 2, is the highest level suspect arrested so far in the anti-trafficking crackdown. **REUTERS/ DAMIR SAGOLJ**

“The suspects are powerful people.

Aek Angsanant

Deputy National Police Chief

border on a hill local people called Khao Kaew or “Glass Mountain.” Police believed it had been hurriedly evacuated just days before. They discovered shallow graves marked with bamboo sticks.

A sombre mood descended as police and rescue volunteers unearthed 26 corpses on May 1. Some were shrouded in cloth or simple bamboo mats. Others were little more than skeletons.

When asked if there were more graves yet to be discovered along Thailand’s border, Police Maj. Gen. Thatchai replied: “Absolutely.”

ESTABLISHMENT LAWYERS

After Anwar came other big-name arrests. Patchuban Angchotipan – a wealthy businessman from Satun province known as Ko Tor or “Big Brother Tor” – gave himself up at a Bangkok police station on May 18.

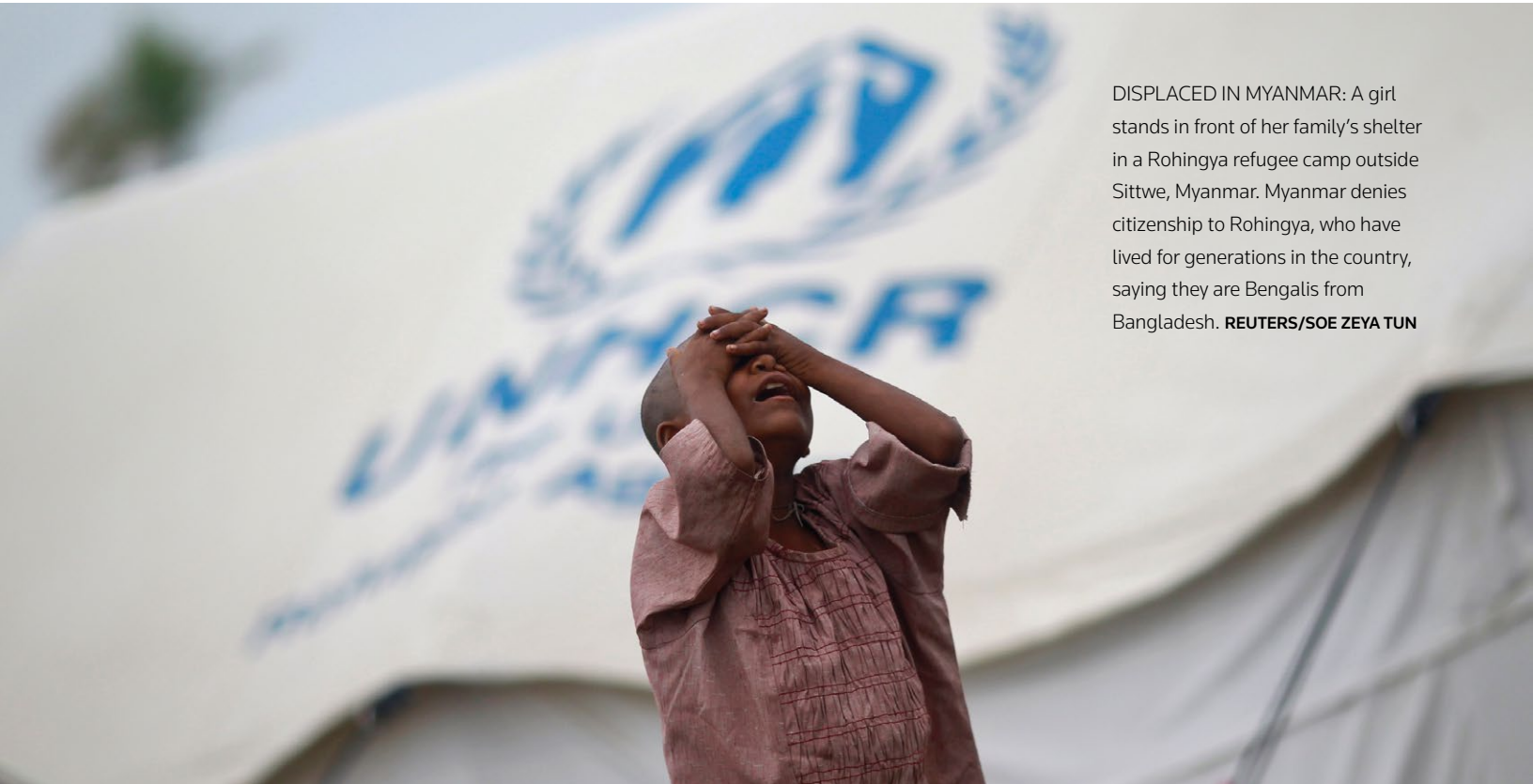
Patchuban, the former chairman of Satun’s provincial administration, has been charged with a range of offences, including human trafficking, holding people for ransom and detention leading to bodily harm.

Patchuban was unavailable for comment. Fighting his case in court will be Wirat Kalayasiri, the chief legal advisor of Thailand’s Democrat Party, which has close links to the military and royalist establishment. Wirat is also representing another key suspect, Anas Hajeemasae, who police describe as Patchuban’s right hand man.

Pakkapon Sirirat, another Democrat Party member, is representing Lieutenant General Manus Kongpan, who surrendered to police on June 2. “I’m a lawyer and I have the right to be a member of a political party,” Pakkapon said. “My job as a lawyer is to look after the accused.”

Manus denies all charges, which include human trafficking, holding people for ransom and hiding corpses.

Manus previously headed an operation to intercept migrants in the Andaman Sea for the Internal Security Operations Command, Thailand’s powerful, military-run equivalent



DISPLACED IN MYANMAR: A girl stands in front of her family's shelter in a Rohingya refugee camp outside Sittwe, Myanmar. Myanmar denies citizenship to Rohingya, who have lived for generations in the country, saying they are Bengalis from Bangladesh. **REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN**

to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "If Manas really is involved in trafficking, he won't escape it and will have to accept the truth," Pakkapon said.

The trials could be lengthy and convictions are far from certain, police said.

On June 16, three men were arrested for intimidating a witness not to testify in the trials. Other witnesses have been threatened by "subordinates" of the accused against testifying, said Aek, the deputy national police chief. "The suspects are powerful people," he said.

HUNDREDS INVOLVED

Moreover, the scores of arrests so far may only represent a fraction of those involved, police say. "There could be hundreds of people involved, including many officials," Thatchai said.

And despite the investigation and crackdown that began in late April, the traffickers' finances seem largely intact. The United Nations estimates people-smuggling across the Bay of Bengal has generated about \$250 million since 2012. Thailand has so far seized assets worth only \$3.5 million.

Aek said Thai authorities "only froze assets of those we suspected of wrong-doing".

The roti seller dares not leave his new home in the provincial police station. He recently stopped praying at a nearby mosque after he heard that some men had turned up to look for him there.

Many known traffickers remained at large, which was why he hoped to be relocated to another country after the trial. "Otherwise," he said, "I will be killed."

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