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No Way Forward, No Way Back: Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia

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Key points:

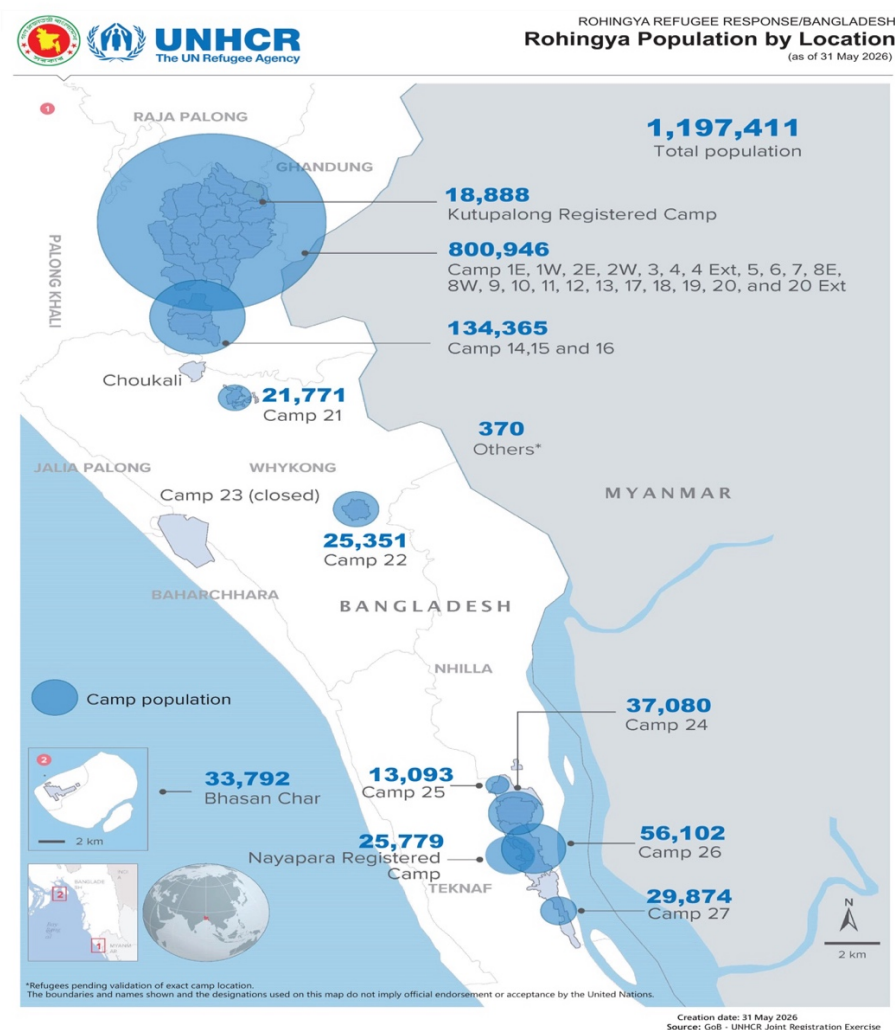
1. The situation in the refugee camps in Bangladesh and temporary shelters in Indonesia is deteriorating not only because of the massive funding cuts but also insufficient safety provisions and natural disasters, forcing more Rohingya to move on and into indebtedness.
2. The numbers of maritime incidents and fatalities in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea is on the rise, while older land-routes are also being revitalised by smuggling and trafficking networks.
3. Hostility against Rohingya is growing in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, fuelled by targeted online mis- and disinformation campaigns that at times have provoked physical violence and renewed displacement.
4. As non-signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia treat Rohingya refugees with maximum discretion, exposing them to immigration raids, arrest, criminal prosecution, detention and deportation.
5. Regulatory change in Malaysia, accompanied by the authorities' collection of biometric data and voice recordings of Rohingya refugees, is intended to eventually replace UNHCR's role in refugee status determination and human rights oversight more generally, but without the prospect of better local integration.

Introduction

Since the Myanmar military and its allies forcibly displaced more than 800,000 Rohingya from Rakhine State in Myanmar in August 2017, their lives have been threatened by ongoing hardship and repeated rejections. This report offers an overview of the latest developments in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, where Rohingya have fled for safety. None of the three host states has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the related 1967 Protocol, rendering the Rohingya a highly vulnerable stateless population. With no large-scale durable and effective solution for the Rohingya in sight, the Rohingya crisis – in its transnational dimensions – is not just continuing but indeed worsening.

Bangladesh: Pushing for return, securitising the camps and preventing departures

As of July 2026, Bangladesh hosts roughly 1.2 million stateless Rohingya refugees, mainly in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char, a remote island where tens of thousands have been relocated from the mainland (United Nations Bangladesh, 2026; UNHCR, 2026a). Bangladesh does not formally recognise the Rohingya as refugees, instead referring to them as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals" (UNHCR, 2026b).



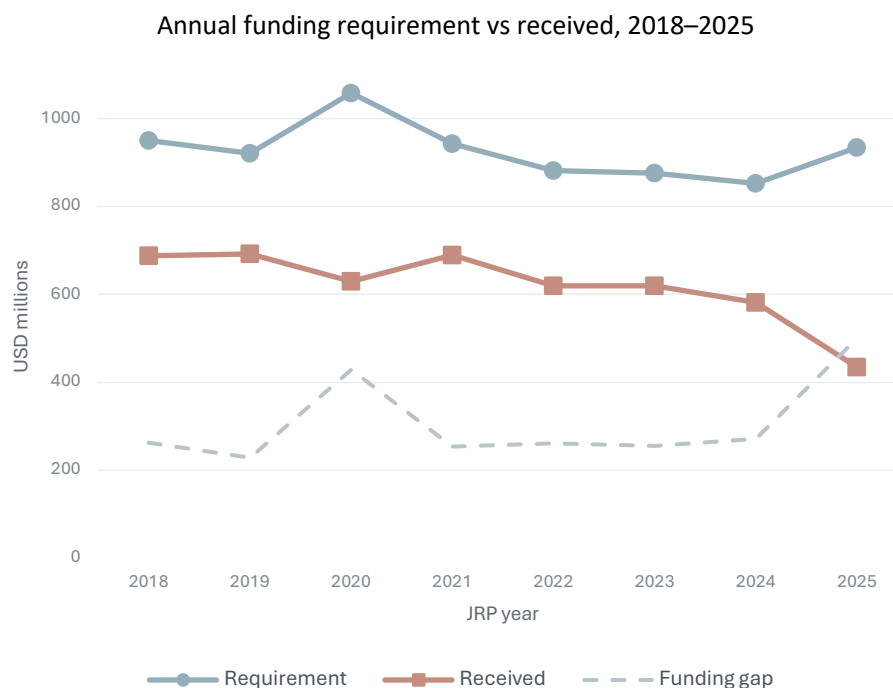
Distribution of the Rohingya refugee population across camps and settlements in Bangladesh, as of 31 May 2026. Source: Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR, 2026.

Rohingya camps: deteriorating conditions and aid cuts

The 33 refugee camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf cover about 24 square kilometres, making the area one of the world's most densely populated refugee settlements. Conditions in the camps remain precarious, as overcrowding, environmental hazards, declining aid, and limited space continue to strain healthcare, sanitation, nutrition and shelter. In July 2026, monsoon-triggered landslides killed at least 17 refugees and displaced more than 3,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2026a).

The Bangladesh government restricts permanent construction in the camps. The government has resisted UNHCR requests for additional land (Human Rights Watch, 2026a). As of 31 December 2025, the 2025 Joint Response Plan (JRP) received only 46 per cent of the required funding, forcing cuts to food assistance and essential services (Rohingya Refugee Response, 2026). The JRP is the framework through which the Government of Bangladesh, the

UN, and humanitarian partners coordinate assistance, protection, and funding for Rohingya refugees and affected host communities. These cuts coincide with the arrival of some 150,000 Rohingya refugees since early 2024, following renewed conflict in Rakhine State (United Nations Bangladesh, 2026).



Source: Rohingya Refugee Response, 2026.

Lack of solutions and rising maritime migration

Bangladesh continues to prioritise the repatriation of the Rohingya. However, the civil war in Myanmar and especially in Rakhine State has made safe and voluntary return highly unlikely. The Arakan Army has emerged as the dominant force, while Myanmar authorities no longer control much of the territory.

Third-country resettlement is one of the few formal routes out of protracted displacement. Since resettlement resumed in 2022, after the programme's 2010 suspension, access has expanded but remains uneven. Resettlements rose from just 24 in 2022 to 3,195 in 2024, before falling to 2,160 in 2025. The decline suggests that resettlement opportunities are increasingly unable to meet the projected needs of 125,500 refugees in Bangladesh in 2026, most of whom are Rohingya.

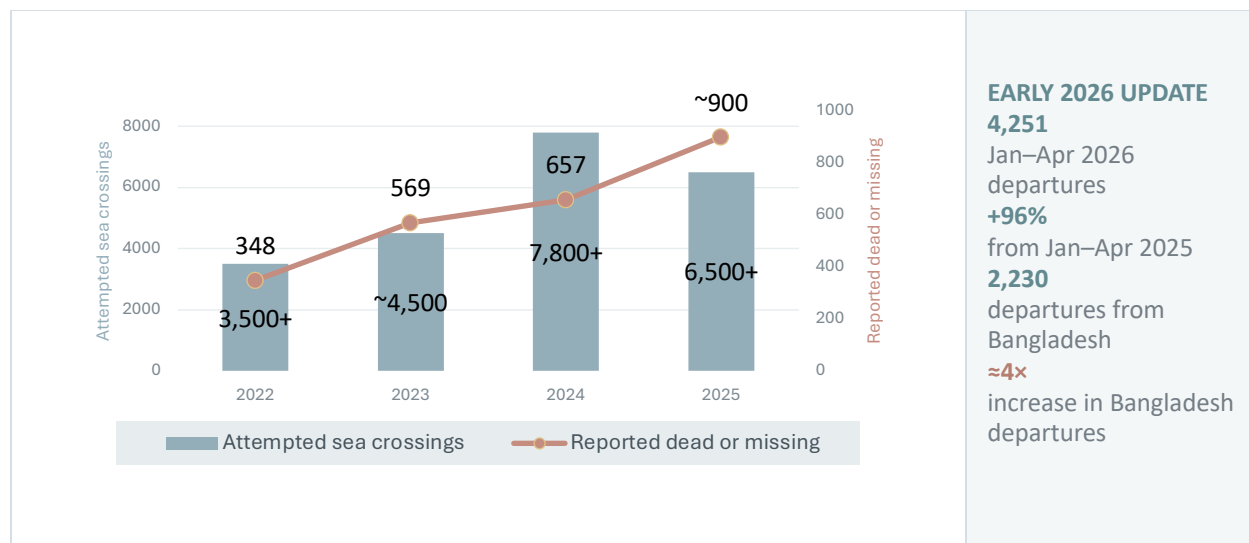
Rohingya Third-Country Resettlement from Bangladesh, 2022–2026

ANNUAL FORMAL RESETTLEMENT DEPARTURES				2026 OUTLOOK 125,500 refugees in Bangladesh projected to need resettlement 233,360 refugees from Myanmar projected to need resettlement
2022 24 first documented batch	→	2023 239 departures	→	
		2024 3,195 departures	→	
			2025 2,160 departures	
12,025 2024 places committed		12,439 2024 submissions	3,195 2024 departures	
4,220 2025 submissions		2,160 2025 departures	113 complementary pathways	
After the 2024 peak, formal departures fell by about 32% in 2025.				

Source: Arab News, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023; UNHCR, 2025a, 2025c, 2026a.

Growing numbers of Rohingya are undertaking maritime journeys, with severe human cost. Attempted crossings rose from more than 3,500 in 2022 to over 7,800 in 2024, remaining above 6,500 in 2025. Over the same period, reported deaths and disappearances nearly tripled to almost 900. By mid-July 2026, three major incidents off Myanmar's and Bangladesh's coasts were reported (Reuters, 2026; UNHCR, 2026c). Children accounted for 44 per cent of Rohingya sea journeys in 2024, up from 37 per cent in 2023. Women also represented nearly one-third of the total figure (UNHCR, 2025b). These trends point to a growing failure of regional protection.

Rohingya Maritime Departures and Reported Deaths/Missing 2022–2025: Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea



Source: UNHCR, 2023, 2024, 2025b, 2026c; IOM, 2026.

Government responses and outlook

The Bangladesh government has increasingly tightened its response through centralised oversight and a proposed militarised border regime. In June 2026, Bangladesh announced plans for barbed-wire fencing along the Myanmar border; officials also described wider smart-surveillance measures, including thermal imaging, night vision, CCTV and drones to strengthen border control (The Daily Star, 2026b). In February 2026, police detained more than 600 Rohingya who were living outside the camps among local communities, highlighting both tighter mobility controls and continued social interaction between refugees and hosts (Dhaka Tribune, 2026). Bangladesh has also intensified action against trafficking networks; in June 2026, the Bangladesh Coast Guard arrested nine suspected traffickers while rescuing 50 people, including 11 Rohingya, from a Malaysia-bound trawler off Teknaf (The Daily Star, 2026d).

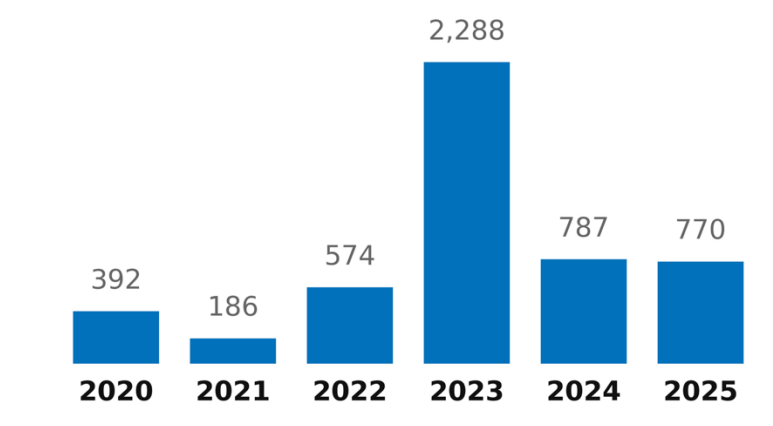
In July 2026, the Cabinet Division established an 11-member National Strategy Formulation Committee on Rohingya Affairs, giving it 90 days to draft a national strategy (The Daily Star, 2026a). At the diplomatic level, Bangladesh is engaging with regional partners, including China, Malaysia and the wider international community, through bilateral, regional, and multilateral channels (BSS, 2026). While political control in Rakhine State continues to shift, the government has also sought to facilitate dialogue between the Myanmar authorities and the Arakan Army to create conditions for eventual Rohingya repatriation (The Daily Star, 2026c). Bangladesh also supports international accountability efforts, including The Gambia's case against Myanmar before the International Court of Justice.

Indonesia: Rejection, neglect and criminalisation

Between 2023 and December 2025, 27 boats with 3,854 Rohingya refugees – the majority being women and children – landed in Indonesia (UNHCR Indonesia, 2025). The refugees were hosted temporarily in four sites in Aceh, the northernmost province on Sumatra Island, two of which were designated as official camps. The other sites were makeshift arrangements, often in remote areas and prone to hostility. Additional sites for Rohingya are located in the two neighbouring provinces, in North Sumatra and in Pekanbaru, Riau. No official boat landings were

recorded for 2026, but the IOM recorded 275 refugees who arrived in Indonesia undetected (IOM, 2026). Some of them were possibly coming from Malaysia in order to reunite with their families in Indonesia.

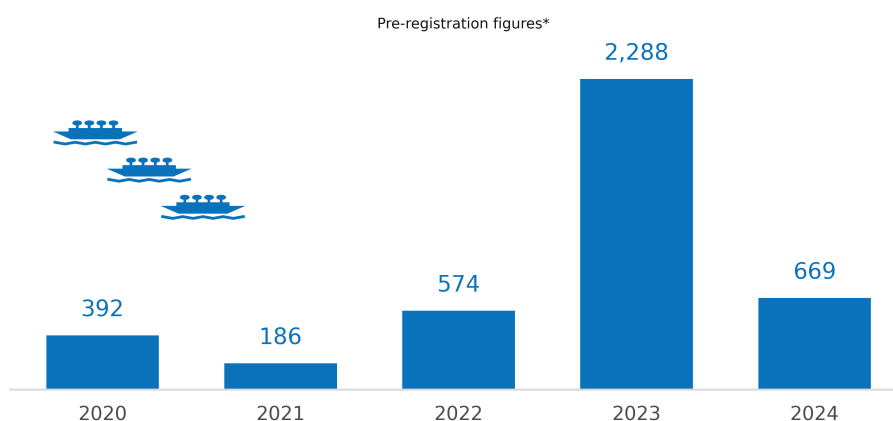
Pre-registration Figures



Pre-registration figures of Rohingya boat arrivals in Aceh. Source: UNHCR Indonesia, 2026.

The lack of reported boat arrivals does not mean that there are no more boats heading to Indonesia, but rather that smuggling networks have adjusted their modus operandi, i.e. by bringing in smaller numbers of people and keeping them in safehouses for shorter periods of time. Smuggling and trafficking networks have also shifted away from Indonesia, instead using previous corridors via Thailand (Hoffstaedter and Missbach, 2026).

Rohingya Boat Arrivals In Indonesia



*Pre-Registration data refers to number of headcount during arrival. Some individuals have left before registration by UNHCR

Source: UNHCR Indonesia, 2024.

Hostilities among the local population

The shift in routes cannot be explained solely by pushbacks conducted by the Indonesian Navy (Al Jazeera, 2023b), which clearly violate Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016: “the discovery of refugees in emergency situations in Indonesian waters shall be coordinated and carried out by agencies that administer search and rescue operations” (Republic of Indonesia, 2016). Hostilities instigated through hate speech in the local media and also by local politicians among the local population have also led to violent tensions between Rohingya who were trying to land in Indonesia and those who had already found shelter. The lead-up to the 2024 national elections saw a steep increase in tensions. In December 2023, hundreds of university students stormed a temporary shelter in Banda Aceh, where mainly Rohingya women and children had been placed, demanding their deportation (Al Jazeera, 2023a). Journalists later revealed that this attack was not a spontaneous incident. The students who spearheaded the attack were suspected of having been organised by local security forces and politicians (Utama, 2024). The anti-Rohingya rallies—which were also replicated in other cities in Aceh later on—were fuelled by online dis- and misinformation campaigns directed both at the Rohingya and the international organisations in charge of protecting and delivering services to Rohingya (Febriandi, 2023). Civil responses, including the local Muslim Council that released a fatwa (a non-binding legal ruling from Muslim scholars) to speak out in favour of rescuing refugee boats in distress (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama Aceh, 2024), were restrained.

While Aceh for many years had held the reputation of being a friendly transit point for Rohingya, the Indonesian government never sought to establish a proper infrastructure to manage incoming Rohingya, but relied on impromptu measures. The lack of proper funding and clearly assigned responsibilities created frustration among the wider population in Aceh, especially in coastal villages that kept seeing renewed arrivals and sub-standard management (UNHCR Indonesia, 2024). Public sentiments toward Rohingya started to change when Indonesian authorities began targeting local fishermen who had been involved in the rescue of Rohingya at sea or had facilitated onward migration. Since 2021, at least 25 Indonesians, often poor men with limited formal education, have been sentenced to perennial prison terms under Indonesia Trafficking or Migration Laws (Missbach and Lee, 2026). The convicted also include 17 Rohingya, who generally received longer prison sentences than Indonesians (Missbach and Lee, 2026). The criminalisation of what is locally often deemed a form of solidarity has further deteriorated the formerly friendly relations between Rohingya and Indonesians. In March 2026, unknown perpetrators burnt down a newly built, yet uninhabited refugee shelter in East Aceh (Rahmi and Viartasiwi, 2026).

As of April 2026, 2,550 Rohingya remained in Indonesia, of whom 380 were in Aceh, while many others have already made their way to Malaysia (UNHCR, 2026). (UNHCR Indonesia, 2026). Since 2006, only 655 Rohingya have been resettled in safe third countries, while 5,252 opted for ‘spontaneous’ departures from Indonesia, often with the assistance of smugglers and usually to Malaysia (UNHCR Indonesia, 2025). Those who cannot afford to travel on to Malaysia tend to move to Pekanbaru, where there are 925 Rohingya living in a camp-like situation. Rohingya in Pekanbaru used to receive cash assistance, not just meal provisions (Reuters, 2025).

Neglect

Over the last three years, the UNHCR has only received a fraction of the funding (52% out of the US\$2.200.000) needed to respond properly to Rohingya boat people (UNHCR Indonesia, 2025). In February 2025, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had to cut its financial support due to global aid cuts. With even more limited access to basic services and financial support, many Rohingya were struggling to meet their essential needs, including food, clean water, health care, and shelter (Rohingya Khobor, 2026). Following a number of peaceful protests, IOM resumed its monthly payments, with adults receiving IDR 1,050,000 per month (approximately USD 58) and minors receiving IDR 500,000 per month (approximately USD 28) (iNews Medan, 2025). Many Rohingya who are already heavily indebted have been forced to borrow more money, often with substantial interest rates, because refugees are barred from legal work in Indonesia.

Rohingya refugees continue to call on the international community, ASEAN, and humanitarian organisations to take urgent action to provide protection, fair assistance, and pathways to live with dignity. Rohingya rights groups have welcomed Indonesia's new criminal code that enables the implementation of a universal jurisdiction when prosecuting perpetrators of serious human rights violations, including atrocities that occurred against Rohingya outside of Indonesia (Kompas, 2026). Several Indonesian NGOs in collaboration with Rohingya human rights advocates have filed a criminal complaint against Myanmar President Min Aung Hlaing, accusing him of committing genocide against the Rohingya, marking a potentially significant legal development under Indonesia's revised penal framework (Kaladan Press, 2026).

Malaysia: Escalating hostility, detention conditions and regulatory change

Malaysia's approximately 126,000 registered Rohingya refugees continue to occupy a precarious legal position. They form part of a wider UNHCR-registered population of around 215,600 refugees and asylum seekers, of whom 193,824 are from Myanmar (UNHCR, 2026d). The actual number of Rohingya in Malaysia is far greater as many remain unregistered (Jalil and Hoffstaedter, 2023: 82). Even registered refugees remain in a legal grey area. Treated as 'illegal immigrants' under the Immigration Act 155, refugees remain vulnerable to arrest, prosecution, detention and deportation regardless of UNHCR documentation.

Detention conditions and documented maltreatment

Enforcement has intensified sharply since mid-2024. Home Ministry statistics record roughly 9,500 immigration raids nationwide, resulting in more than 35,000 arrests for immigration-related offences. Over 21,000 people are held in Malaysian detention facilities as of November 2025 (MyMetro, 2025). Fortify Rights' recent investigation documented specific cases of abuse inside these facilities (Fortify Rights, 2026a). A 15-year-old Rohingya girl, arrested at a checkpoint for not possessing UNHCR documents, was held at a police station where an officer demanded a bribe of approximately 2,000 ringgit (approximately USD 500) for her release, then reneged on the agreement after payment (Fortify Rights, 2026a). Detainees interviewed inside immigration detention centres reported severe overcrowding: one 18-year-old described 220 people crammed into a single cell with inadequate food and forced stress-position roll calls, while a UNHCR-registered man from Klang described 134 men sharing a space only 20 to 30 feet long (Fortify Rights, 2026a). Legal access is also obstructed: a humanitarian worker and a refugee serving as a volunteer interpreter were reportedly denied entry to a detention-centre court; the interpreter was told that he could not enter "even if you are a UNHCR cardholder" (Fortify Rights, 2026a). Many Rohingya refugees have reportedly spent more than two years in Malaysian immigration detention, with no legal limit on the duration of such detention (Global Detention Project, 2022, 2026).

A new registration regime

In response, Malaysia began rolling out the Dokumen Pendaftaran Pelarian (DPP), a new government-run registration system intended to eventually replace UNHCR's role in status determination. Launched in January 2026, its first phase focuses on refugee status determination for around 4,000 detained refugees, almost all of whom are Rohingya, with roughly 4,000 people registered so far (LiCAS.news, 2026). Rights groups have flagged serious concerns: the system involves biometric data, voice recordings and facial recognition collected according to Malaysia's Home Minister (Fortify Rights, 2026b; Human Rights Watch, 2026b). Fortify Rights notes the DPP appears to have been designed to operate independently of UNHCR data, and that Malaysia's Home Minister has stated that the "end result will still be repatriation, third-country resettlement or deportation", meaning registration is not conceived as a pathway to permanent legal status in Malaysia (Fortify Rights, 2026b). Resettlement options, meanwhile, have collapsed: only 1,970 refugees were resettled from Malaysia in 2025, down from 8,627 in 2024, following the US resettlement ban (Malay Mail, 2026a).

A surge in anti-Rohingya hostility

Since late May 2026, Malaysia has seen an unprecedented online mobilisation against the Rohingya. A Change.org petition calling for Rohingya to be “removed” from the country gathered more than 424,000 signatures within roughly two weeks, up from around 280,000 the previous week, before Change.org placed it under review (South China Morning Post, 2026). The petition’s framing, citing “strain on resources”, “security concerns” and community “fear”, echoes rhetoric that Human Rights Watch documented more than two decades ago, when Rohingya were similarly cast as competitors for jobs and threats to security (Rohingya Refugee News, 2026). This has caused tangible harm: the campaign has included the doxing of a prominent Rohingya activist and President of the Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation in Malaysia (MERHROM), alongside social media comments described as potentially life-threatening and inciting violence (ARTICLE 19, 2026). Fortify Rights reported a banner in Terengganu State calling on residents to “rise up” against Rohingya refugees, and local statements report community leaders receiving threats and having home addresses circulated online (Fortify Rights, 2026c; Malaysiakini, 2026). The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia’s statement on 3 June 2026 condemning the rhetoric was itself met with a backlash. Calls for the Commission’s dissolution indicate how mainstream the hostility has become (ARTICLE 19, 2026).

Government response and outlook

The Malaysian Government’s response to this open hostility has been mixed. Physical demolition of Rohingya-occupied structures took place at Kampung Baru Sungai Makau, Tekali in June 2026 (Malay Mail, 2026b), and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has directed the Home Ministry to review inter-agency findings on “Rohingya management” (Malay Mail, 2026c). At the same time, incremental protections have emerged, including a Legal Aid and Public Defence Bill guaranteeing legal aid access for refugee children, with discretionary extension to adults, alongside modest budget allocation for the DPP programme (UNHCR, 2025d).

The likely trajectory is one of continued precarity rather than resolution. The convergence of a punitive registration scheme explicitly oriented towards eventual removal, a resettlement pipeline that has effectively closed, entrenched and documented detention abuses, and a rapidly normalising climate of online hate suggests Rohingya in Malaysia face compounding rather than easing pressure.

Final Comments

Given Myanmar’s continued refusal to recognise Rohingya citizenship or accept returns, repatriation remains untenable, leaving Rohingya refugees caught between hostile regional protection spaces and a country that will not have them back. This continues to drive Rohingya towards the perilous boat journey across the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, with fatal consequences: two boats were reported lost or believed to have sunk off Myanmar’s coast in July 2026, with more than 500 people feared dead (United Nations News, 2026). Following the reported sinking of one boat carrying an estimated 250 people, Médecins Sans Frontières and the signatories of an April 2026 open letter to the Australian Government called for urgent action to strengthen regional preparedness and search-and-rescue capacity, warning that without it, tragedies of this kind will keep recurring (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2026). As co-chairs of the Bali Process, the regional body responsible for coordinating responses to irregular migration, Australia and Indonesia are particularly well placed to act. This could include resourcing Southeast Asian search-and-rescue bodies and ensuring survivors are disembarked at the nearest safe port with appropriate post-rescue protection and reception conditions.

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