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Action at Sea

WHY ARE ROHINGYA BOATS GOING MISSING IN THE BAY OF BENGAL?

TWO MISSING BOATS, HUNDREDS LOST: THE BAY OF BENGAL CRISIS

UN officials announced that more than **500 Rohingya refugees** are feared dead after two large boats that left Myanmar in late June bound for Malaysia have not been heard from (*Al Jazeera and Reuters, 2026*).

2026 is on track to be one of the **deadliest years for Rohingya** maritime movements, as refugees risk dangerous monsoon conditions. This follows 2025, which was already recognized as the deadliest year on record (*UNHCR, 2026*).



WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA?

Rohingya, the world's largest stateless population, have fled their homes in Myanmar in large numbers since the mid-2010s. They frequently attempt to cross the ocean to Indonesia, Malaysia, and other locations.

This is a long and dangerous voyage. The journey from Rakhine to Malaysia can take weeks at sea, leaving little margin if food, water, or weather turns against passengers mid-crossing.

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WHAT MAKES THESE VOYAGES FATAL?

Boats are typically aging wooden fishing trawlers, packed well beyond capacity, with unreliable engines and little or no safety equipment. Smuggler economics reward overcrowding.

The route crosses vast, remote stretches of sea with little to no SAR infrastructure.

Some regional states intercept boats only to turn them back rather than take passengers ashore.



WHY NOW?

The most recent missing boats departed in June, when travellers risk monsoon weather, rather than the usual 'sailing season' in November-March.

Increased fighting (*Human Rights Watch, 2025*) in Myanmar, combined with **aid cuts** (*UN News, 2026*) in refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh, have left many Rohingya with few alternatives. Unable to wait out the suffering, they take their chances with the storms.



Building bridges to save lives at sea

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