Migrants on boat rescued off Indonesia recall horrific scenes

Crisis escalates as nearly 800 people rescued from boat that was sinking off Indonesian coast

Nearly 800 desperate migrants from Burma and Bangladesh were rescued from a sinking vessel by fishermen off Indonesia’s coast on Friday as the boat people crisis in south-east Asia continued to escalate.

As the United Nations warned of a “massive humanitarian disaster”, up to 8,000 migrants were believed to be abandoned at sea by smugglers scared off by Thailand’s recent crackdown on human traffickers.

The vessels are packed with ethnic Muslim Rohingya escaping discrimination and sectarian violence in Buddhist-majority Burma and impoverished economic migrants fleeing Bangladesh.
In an impassioned plea to regional governments on Friday, the International Organisation for Migration, implored: “In the name of humanity, let these migrants land.”

But Burma, which refuses citizenship to the Rohingya, looked likely to snub a regional meeting called by Thailand on 29 May to address the growing crisis.

Reports emerged of horrific scenes on the sinking boat, with 794 on board including 61 children, before it was rescued 30 miles off Indonesia’s coast on Friday after two months at sea.

Passengers said the captain fled by speedboat five days ago after destroying the engine, and fighting between the Rohingya and Bangladeshis broke out as food and water ran out. Dozens died in the fighting or from illness, it was said. Among the dead was the 20-year-old brother of Manu Abudul Salam, 19, a Rohingya. “They thought the captain was from our country, so they attacked us with stick and knives,” she told Associated Press.

“If I had known that the boat journey would be so horrendous, I would rather have just died in Myanmar [Burma],” she sobbed.

Bangladeshi survivor Saidul Islam, 19, said the vessel was hot and cramped. “We could not stand up. When we asked for water, the captain hit us with wire.”

Another, named Amin, said the captain would shoot dead migrants who asked for food.

The vessel was half under water when found off Aceh province on Thursday with children swimming around it. Six fishing boats ferried the exhausted passengers ashore, where they were taken to a warehouse in Langsa. Eight who were critically ill were taken to hospital.
“They were killing each other, throwing people overboard,” Sunarya, the police chief in Langsa, told AFP. “Because [the boat] was overcapacity, some people had to go and probably they were defending themselves.”