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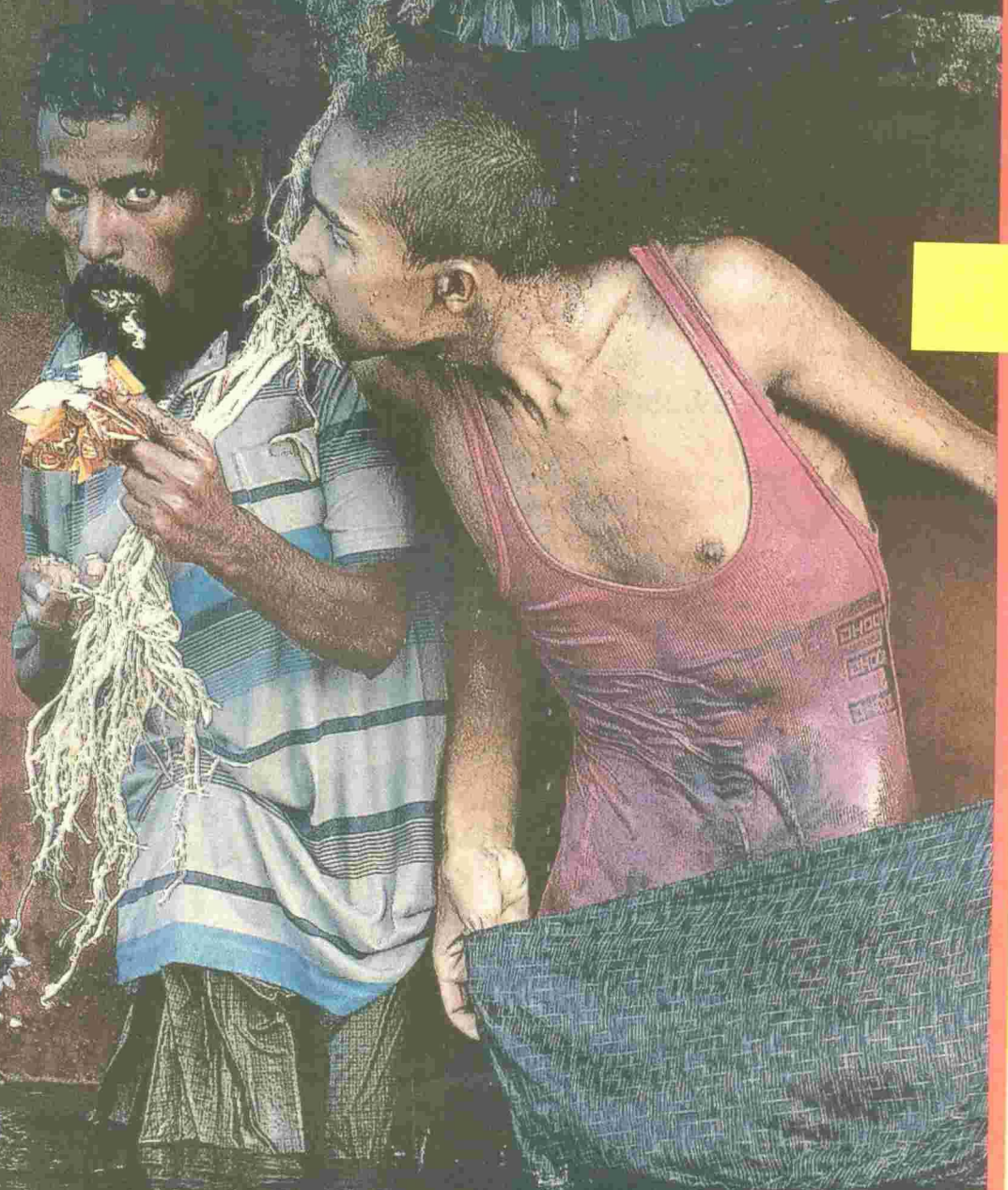


PLUSH

SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 2016

Faces of human tragedy

A PHOTOGRAPHY SHOWCASE OF
THE ASIAN AND EUROPEAN
REFUGEE CRISES
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MISSION TO PRESERVE
TRADITIONAL ARTS

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MY FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS

Two photojournalists whose works are featured in the exhibition *Odysseys* relate the stories behind their images, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



Rohingya migrants jumping to collect food supplies dropped by a Thai army helicopter (By Christophe Archambault).



Rohingya migrants pass food supplies dropped by the Thai army helicopter into the Andaman Sea. (By Christophe Archambault)



"They were crying and begging for food. We threw bottles of water that we had to them."

Christophe Archambault

TRUSTY camerainhand, aman dressed in a cotton shirt, jeans and a hardy pair of shoes hikes up Bukit Wang Burma in Wang Kelian, Perlis. It is stiflingly hot and humid in the dense tropical jungle. Still, he has a job to do and that is to capture images in order to tell a newsworthy story.

Suddenly, he steps on something hard. He lifts his foot and looks down at a squashed, decomposing human skull. Quietly, he reaches down to pick these human remains with a leaf and respectfully moves it out of his path.

The photographer in question is Mohd Rasfan. He works with Agence France-Presse (AFP) and is based in Kuala Lumpur. Three of his images taken in May last year are featured in *Odysseys*, an exhibition of the photographs taken from the Asia and Europe refugee crises. AFP, in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is holding this exhibition which started in Bangkok.

It is World Refugee Day on May 20, and the exhibition is now in Kuala Lumpur, and will later move on to Jakarta.

INTERRUPTED BUSINESS MODEL

A few months before Rasfan's venture to Wang Kelian, the authorities in Thailand had launched a crackdown on human trafficking. In time, when mass graves were discovered in the region, many smug-

gling camps were raided. These camps were mid-way stations, where migrants were detained in prison-like conditions until they or their families could pay the human traffickers for passage to their intended destination.

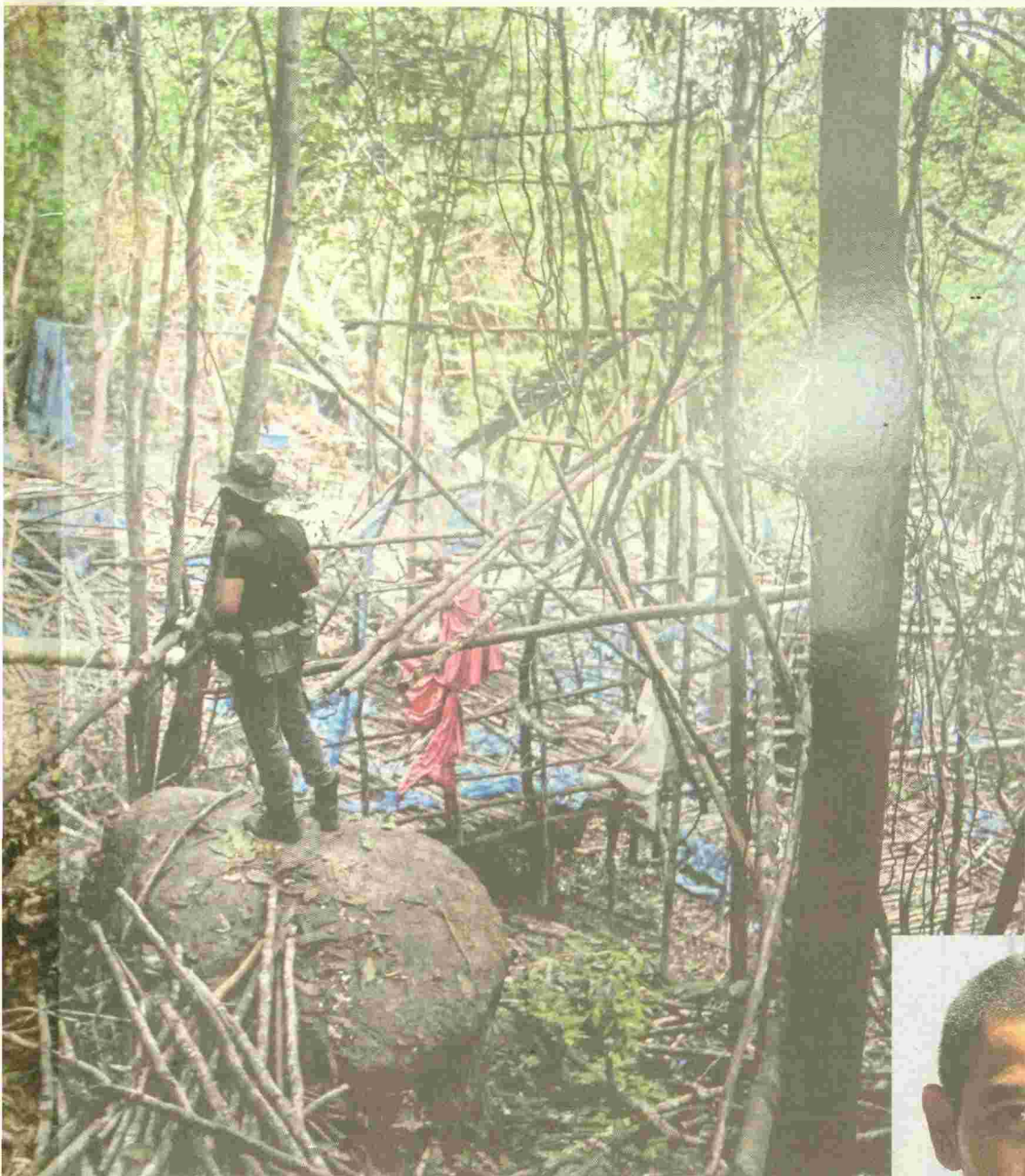
The first image that this 34-year-old shares is of one such smuggling camp. "That's the police from the Royal Malaysian Police. He's standing guard. The camp is now abandoned. We don't know where those who survive went." He then points to a spot outside the frame of the image and says: "Further up is the mass grave."

The father of three then walks to another haunting image of a pile of exhumed bodies in the back of a non-descript truck. "This one is the bodies," he adds. "I have no idea where these bodies went to."

This crackdown on human trafficking and the discovery of these mass graves, once reported as "an interruption to a business model", had another unintended repercussion. Quite simply, once the traffickers were under threat of arrest, there was nowhere to go for those migrants who were still in transit at sea.

BETRAYAL

Indeed on May 14 last year, Christophe Archambault and his colleagues received a tip-off and went in search of a boat of migrants in the Andaman Sea off the coast of Koh Lipe in Western Thailand. The AFP photographer now based in Bangkok stands before the iconic image of this event



“That’s the police from the Royal Malaysian Police. He’s standing guard. The camp is now abandoned.”

Mohd Rasfan

and says: “We arrived in the afternoon. It was a boat full of people. Men, women and children.”

Most of the 400 people on board that vessel were emaciated, desperate and half-naked. They were Rohingya fleeing oppressive conditions in Myanmar’s Rakhine state.

“They were crying and begging for food. We threw bottles of water that we had to them,” says Archambault. These people had no citizenship, hence, they had no jobs, access to healthcare or the ability to educate their children. Subject to violence, they had nothing left to lose and were ripe to fall prey to human traffickers with promises of a better life elsewhere. Their journeys as human cargo began with a voyage across the Bay of Bengal to Thailand, then over land to Malaysia and elsewhere.

In a story replete with betrayal, the crew of this particular boat, aware of imminent arrest, abandoned these migrants. As though that wasn’t enough, the crew went further: “They sabotaged the boat.” They destroyed the engine and left the boat to drift. “Look,” says Archambault, pointing to the rope in the next image. “This boat is

tied to another fishing boat that is pulling it. It means their engine wasn’t working.”

DRAMA OF HORRORS

“Then, it all became dramatic,” says an animated Archambault. “Suddenly, we could hear this loud sound in the sky. The waves started to pick up. When we looked up, we saw the Royal Thai Navy helicopter. They threw down food packages into the sea.”

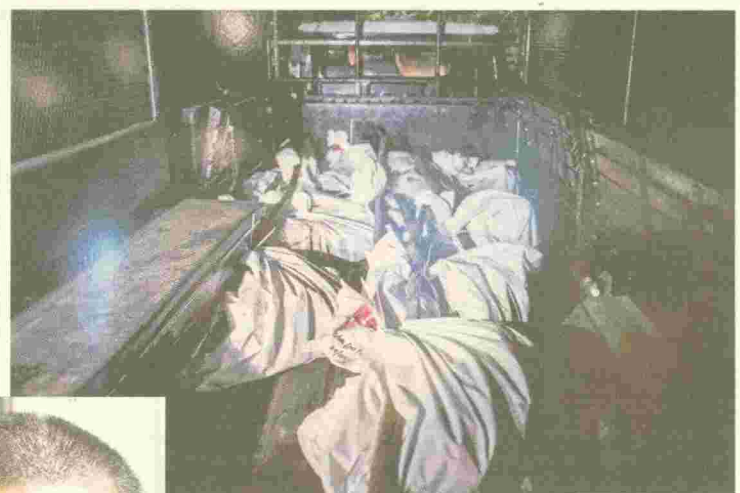
The magnitude of the migrants’ despair was on full display when, in spite of being emaciated, some of them jumped into the sea to retrieve these food packets. “Some didn’t wait until they went back to the boat. They ripped open the plastic packets to devour the food.”

The 45-year-old photojournalist then stands in front of an image of two men. The one on the left, now identified as 37-year-old Hamid Hussien, is perched at the bottom of the boat. Full-bearded, he’s devouring a packet of noodles. To his left is an emaciated young man who is now known as 18-year-old Muhammad Ehsan.

“He’s hiding,” says Archambault. “He didn’t climb up to the boat. But it’s his eyes.



Rohingya refugees from Myanmar living in a house in Ampang. (By Mohd Rasfan)



Exhumed bodies from a grave site near an abandoned camp used by human traffickers in Wang Kelian, Perlis. (By Mohd Rasfan) PICTURES BY ZUNNUR AL SHAFIQ



Look at them. I see that guilt. As though he’s eating and not sharing with others. I wanted to tell him that he doesn’t have to feel guilty. But he was so hungry. He didn’t know what to think anymore.”

DIGNITY RECLAIMED

With the authorities in the region turning these migrants away, the boat was left to drift, yet again. Meanwhile, the images that Archambault, Rasfan and their colleagues took of these tragedies made the headlines the world over.

As luck or humanity would have it, a few days later, the migrants were rescued off the coast of Indonesia’s Aceh province and given shelter by local authorities with the help of non-governmental organisations and others like UNHCR and European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department.

In a tale that ends on a hopeful note, Archambault says: “This photo was the ‘before’ one. Now, look at the one on the right. That’s the ‘after’ photo.” Tapping into AFP’s vast network, Archambault’s counterpart in Indonesia, Chiadeer Mahyuddin, went in search of these survivors. He found

the same two men in a camp for refugees located in the Bayuen district.

Taken some 10 days after Archambault’s pictures, this image shows a more relaxed Hamid Hussien and Muhammad Ehsan. They have some new clothes and are clean-shaven. What makes them barely recognisable are the looks on their faces — guilt and shame are replaced with hope and dignity. In some of the other “before” and “after” photos that Archambault showcases in the exhibition, the refugees are smiling.

Faced with such tragedies regularly, these hardened photojournalists have their own coping mechanism. Squaring his shoulders, Rasfan says: “It’s my job. As a photographer, you need to be tough.”

Full of conviction, Archambault adds: “I intensely believe in what I am doing. My job is to put faces on human tragedy. This is the most efficient way that I can do it.”

He crosses his arms and says: “If people can see what is going on, then maybe, there will be a shift and they will show consideration for others. It’s up to people’s principles.” Throwing his hands in the air, he concludes: “Help your neighbour. Show solidarity for your fellow citizen. I believe in human beings.”

Cover photo by Christophe Archambault.

Odysseys, an exhibition of images from the Asia and Europe refugee crises

WHERE White Box, Level G2, Publika, 1, Jalan Dutamas 1, Kuala Lumpur
WHEN Until June 18