

REFUGEE advocates expect a new wave of "stateless" Rohingya asylum seekers to attempt perilous sea voyages in rickety boats from ports in Bangladesh, raising concerns about how they will be treated if they land in Thailand.

A boatload of 92 Rohingya fleeing persecution in Burma's border regions has been handed over to the Thai army near a fishing port north of the resort island of Phuket.

Three years ago the Thai army was behind a then secret policy of casting Rohingya adrift, causing hundreds of deaths.

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One group of almost 100 was pushed back out to sea in an engineless boat with little food or water.

The policy was exposed after photographs of asylum seekers in distressed conditions on boats and beaches were published worldwide.

Following international condemnation of the policy, immigration officials began to handle groups of Rohingya who landed in Thailand earlier this year.

But the handing over of the latest asylum seekers to the army indicates a reversal of the policy.

The whereabouts of the boys and men who waded ashore last Thursday after apparently scuttling their boat is unknown.

A photograph published on the *Phuke-tWan* website showed them crammed into the back of

an army truck.

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group, usually attempt the voyages during the "sailing season" between November and April when conditions on the monsoon-prone Andaman Sea are tranquil.

They are trying to reach Malaysia, where an estimated 50,000 Rohingya live. Some are also expected to chance their luck with people smugglers to try to reach Australia.

Human Rights Watch says that for more than 30 years the Rohingya have faced extra-judicial killings, forced labour, religious persecution and restrictions of movement by Burmese authorities.

As many as 300,000 have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, where they live in primitive and squalid conditions in makeshift refugee camps.

Bangladesh does not give them official resident status or work papers.

An estimated 800,000 Rohingya remain in Burma, primarily in western Arakan state and Rangoon where their citizenship is not formally recognised.

The Rohingya are descended from a mix of Arakanese Buddhists, Chittagonian Bengalis and Arabic sea traders.

Their leaders have not been included in preliminary peace talks with other ethnic groups in Burma's border areas, some of which have small armies that have been fighting the Burmese for decades.

Hillary Clinton is due to travel to Burma later this week in the first visit to the isolated and impoverished country by a US secretary of state for 50 years.

US envoys have told Burma's military-dominated government that economic sanctions would not be lifted until the Burmese army ended its repression of ethnic groups despite the government appearing to have embarked on a path of economic and political reform.

From: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/more-boat-people-to-flee-burma-20111127-1o1bu.html>

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