

Washington, explains that “The trafficking of the Rohingya is clearly driven by violent conflicts in Myanmar’s Rakhine State.

Without tackling this root cause, human trafficking networks may continue to operate in the shadows.”

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The trial took place following the May 2015 discovery of mass graves in southern Thailand near the Malaysian border. Human Rights Watch reports that at least 30 bodies were found and that the victims — mostly migrants identified as ethnic Rohingya from Myanmar and Bangladesh — lost their lives due to inadequate food and disease while traffickers were waiting to receive ransoms from the families before smuggling them into Malaysia.

The unearthing of mass graves occurred one week prior to the humanitarian “boat crisis” that took place in May of 2015, during which regional governments pushed back the boats carrying Rohingya migrants, leaving them stranded at sea. The development also came at the height of international criticism on the prevalence of human trafficking in Thailand. The US government downgraded Thailand to Tier 3 — the lowest tier — in the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report in 2014 and again in 2015 for not complying with the US standards for the elimination of human trafficking. While Thailand’s anti-trafficking efforts are assessed based on the “3P” approach (prosecution, protection, prevention), the issue of official complicity is among those consistently raised by the United States. Most recently, the 2017 TIP Report, published before the July 2017 trafficking trial, states that Thailand “did not aggressively prosecute and convict officials complicit in trafficking crimes, and official complicity continued to impede anti-trafficking efforts.”

Meanwhile, from the Thai government’s perspective, progress has been made against official complicity in human trafficking. For example, the discovery of the mass grave in 2015 was followed by an investigation by senior police officer Paween Pongsirin, which implicated “influential figures” in the Thai government, military, and police in human trafficking. Subsequently, due to the fear for his life after the investigation, Paween left for Australia to claim political asylum. Then, in 2016, the government reported increasing numbers of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions.

In July 2017, the court delivered the 500-page verdict which took over 12 hours to read. Many of the 62 defendants were found guilty on charges of forcible detention leading to death, trafficking, rape, and membership in transnational organized criminal networks. Moreover, the jail sentences for the convicted officials range from 27 to 78 years and those convicted of