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Burma: Causes of Migration

Burma is a country of approximately 50 million people which has been under military dictatorship since 1962. The regime has been progressively expanding military control over the country, particularly over the resource-rich ethnic areas. It has carried out repeated military offensives and anti-insurgency programs against civilians in ethnic areas, which have caused massive displacement. In 1996 the regime delineated a huge area in eastern Burma and ordered the forced relocation of every village in the region, whether or not these villages had any contact with ethnic arm groups. This has led to the destruction of over 3,000 villages in Eastern Burma in the last twelve years, according to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium.

The regime continues to commit serious human rights abuses, such as rape, extrajudicial killings, forced labour, land and property confiscation, and forced relocations in Burma. Impunity for sexual violence by the Burmese military is continuing. For example, last July a 15-year-old Kachin schoolgirl in northern Burma was gang-raped and murdered by Burma Army troops, but the rapists have still not been brought to justice.

There is also increasing displacement as a result of state-authorized development projects. These include large-scale hydropower projects, gas pipelines, mining operations, and coercive agricultural programs, such as the forcing of people throughout the country to grow jatropha for biofuel, which is threatening food security by taking land and labour from growing other crops.

Currently there are over half a million internally displaced people in Eastern Burma alone. Many are hiding in the jungles, searching for food secretly, and trying their best to survive day by day in land-mined areas, and many are feeling to neighbouring countries -Thailand, China, India and Bangladesh.

There are now over 146,000 refugees from Burma in camps in Thailand, but many refugees have no access to camps, and are forced to become migrant workers. It is estimated there are about 2 million migrant workers from Burma in Thailand. However, according to the Migrant Assistant Program Foundation (MAP) only about 500,000 Burmese migrant workers were officially registered in 2007.

Situation of migrants from Burma in Thailand

In Thailand, migrant labor plays a significant role. However, migrant workers' contribution to the Thai economy is not given enough credit, and the media and NGOs usually focus more on "problem" migrant issues, such as work permits, medical care, education of children and human rights.

Popular media coverage, databases and Web sites frequently concentrate on issues such as migrants' roles in spreading HIV/AIDS, crimes, prostitution and so on. Therefore, the image of migrants in the minds of Thai citizens is poorly defined and frequently includes a fear factor.

The Thai officials label migrants as criminal elements and claim they threaten national security. Such accusations actually are not in the everyday experiences of most Thais, but end up promoting bad attitudes towards migrants among the Thai community.

For example, in the summer of 2007, the Chiang Mai Police chief called a meeting to crack down on Shan motorcycle owners after the robbery of a British citizen. During the same period, there were police orders to crack down on motorbike theft and gang activities. The media, including the Chiang Mai Mail, speculated that Shan migrants from Burma were responsible for the crimes. Their assumptions appeared to have been wrong, as criminals arrested for similar crimes throughout the year were not Shan or migrant workers

Another example is based on an accusation made in May 2005 that Shan laborers cruelly killed and ate dogs from a Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai. The Thai Animal Guardians Association, Lanna Dog Rescue and the Chiang Mai Mail explicitly named Shan and other Burmese migrants from a nearby construction site as suspects. But, according to a senior member of Lanna Dog Rescue, the killer later turned out to be an abbot's driver and the issue was dropped.

Unfortunately, the benefits of migrant laborers are usually underplayed or ignored. Migrant labor clearly plays an indispensable role in many aspects of the Thai economy. Yet, the positive role of migrant laborers is often lost in the maze of stereotype images which ultimately serve the interests of the governing elites who use xenophobia and nationalism to their benefit.

Women migrant workers

Female migrant workers face serious security concerns because they regularly have an experience of rape, sexual harassment and violence while working in host countries.

Women have a very limited choice of occupations with low payment. Most have to work as domestic workers, in farms, construction sites, and factories, including sea food companies. Women face double discrimination not only because of their race, ethnicity or religion but also because of their gender.

In the northern part of Thailand, in each farm there are often up to 300 to 500 migrant workers. The workers are usually restricted from leaving the farms, and it is difficult for them to go to local hospitals because of lack of medical costs, transportation and language problems.

Workers need to pay the cost of their work permit cards on their own, but they can't afford to pay the fee at one time, so their employers pay for them first and then the workers have to pay back the cost at the rate of 10 baht per day. This means the employers are unwilling to let them take time off, even when they are sick.

I would like to share a story of a migrant woman farm worker who couldn't access health care. She became pregnant with her fifth child but she did not dare to go to hospital to check her pregnancy because she was afraid of being absent from work, as she had to pay 10 Baht back to her employer each day. Finally, she gave birth on her own in the farm with no medical assistants.

We visited her in the farm a week after she had given birth and she was still very weak, and one of her other young daughters was suffering from malaria, and was almost unconscious. We sent the daughter to hospital immediately and took care of her and provided the medical costs.

This is just one example of a woman who we were able to assist. There are many more migrant women working in farms and other workplaces who are being restricted from accessing basic health care by their employers.

Over the past nine years, our organization SWAN, has set up various programs to assist and promote the rights of migrant Shan women in northern Thailand. These include:

A health program. We run three health centres, and two women's crisis support centres.

We also run an education program. We have set up 16 schools providing basic education to migrant Shan children.

We also run a women's empowerment program, giving trainings to women in various skills, including literacy, and we run an income generation program.

We also produce newsletters and other Shan language materials to raise awareness among migrant Shan women of their rights.

New Thai Policy on Migrants

According to a new policy from the Thai Department of Employment, migrant workers from Burma must now undergo a process of "national verification" at "Myanmar National Verification Centers" on the Thai-Burma border, so they can get an official passport, visa and work permit. This process was scheduled to begin on September 1, 2008.

We are very concerned about this process. Many migrants, particularly refugees from conflict areas in Burma, are too afraid to travel and register with the Burmese authorities. It is also very difficult for migrants to travel to the border to register, as it is expensive and most have no documentation to travel.

Recommendations for the Thai government regarding migrant workers:

- To let migrant workers be recognised as workers by the Social security office and be eligible for social security and compensation benefits in case of accidents at work
- To promote a public campaign for the protection of working rights of migrant domestic workers, starting with a clause in the registration letter for employers that migrant domestic workers must be given one day paid leave a week
- To promote the rights of migrant workers to association and collective bargaining
- To monitor the implementation of the labour complaints mechanisms and to survey and expose the difficulties for the Labour protection offices, NGOs and migrants
- To accept more migrant workers for registration to receive work permits
- To ensure that migrant workers and their children have access to health care and education