

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 39/002/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 153
8 June 2005

Embargo Date: 8 June 2005 00:01 GMT

Thailand: Abuses and exploitation of migrant workers exposed

Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are routinely paid well below the Thai minimum wage, work long hours in unhealthy conditions and are at risk of arbitrary arrest and deportation, said Amnesty International today in a new report.

The report exposes a lack of basic labour rights and highlights the abuse and exploitation of migrant workers by smugglers, Thai employers and police. This includes frequent shakedowns by police in order to extract bribes.

A new registration process taking place from 1 – 30 June 2005 for migrant workers from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, permitting them to remain in Thailand until June 2006, is an opportunity for the Thai government to ensure strong protection for migrant workers.

"The Royal Thai Government should ensure that the security forces do not arbitrarily arrest migrant workers, particularly in order to extract bribes," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Asia.

"It should protect migrant workers from mistreatment, harassment and intimidation by employers, police and local officials, and ensure that they are not returned to countries where they risk torture and ill-treatment."

Amnesty International interviewed 115 Burmese migrants in seven locations in Thailand. The interviewees were working or looking for work in the fishing, manufacturing, agricultural, construction industries, or as day labourers or domestic workers.

One Burmese migrant worker told Amnesty International: "The Thai people regard us as garbage — they don't see the Burmese as helping the economy. We take jobs which they won't do. They see us as trouble-makers, never as friends."

Amnesty International called on the Thai government to ensure that all workers in Thailand enjoy basic labour rights, including adequate wages, reasonable working hours, and safe and healthy working conditions.

Background

Hundreds of thousands of Burmese migrant workers are employed in various sectors of Thai industry including fisheries, garment factories, domestic and construction work, hotels and restaurants, and agriculture. As Thailand has become more prosperous, fewer Thai people are willing to work in jobs commonly seen as "dirty, dangerous, and demeaning". Burmese workers have arrived to fill the gap.

For several years the Royal Thai Government has dealt with the labour shortage by establishing a series of registration processes for migrant workers. Although flawed in both policy and implementation terms, these registrations have been a good faith attempt to regularize and establish a legal framework addressing the flow of migrants.

For the full text of the report, Thailand: The Plight of Burmese Migrant Workers, please go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGASA39012005>

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