

Asia/ Thailand**Plight of Burmese migrants**

Excerpts from a report on Women's Human Rights Concerns in Tsunami-affected Countries, brought out by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD) on 22 March 2005, on the situation of women in tsunami-affected regions

Over 120,000 Burmese migrants and their dependents registered with the Thai authorities in the four provinces in the south of Thailand were issued temporary identity (ID) cards, according to July 2004 statistics. Most of them lost their cards during the tsunami. Of them, about 7,000 were employed in the sectors most affected by the tsunami: fisheries, construction and tourism. There are also many unregistered migrants working illegally in Thailand who have lost family members, their homes and their jobs. Most unregistered migrants are women.

In the tsunami aftermath, the Thai government started arbitrary arrests and forced deportation of Burmese migrant workers. Due to the pressure from both inside and outside the country, arrests and deportation were stopped. However, two months after the tsunami, Burmese migrant workers are still hiding in the hilltops, among plantations of coconut, rubber and banana. Some migrants have also gone to neighbouring provinces in search of work, and are staying with friends and relatives. Many intend to return to the tsunami-affected areas soon and seek work with their employers, hoping that by that time they would also have recovered and be ready to employ them again. Some of them have got back from Burma and neighbouring provinces because they heard that there have not been any arrests recently and that NGOs are providing assistance to re-issue work permits and emergency relief supplies.

Burmese migrant workers who survived the tsunami need the State authorities to reissue their temporary ID cards as quickly as possible. Without the cards, they have no right to stay in Thailand, have no access to health services and cannot apply for a work permit. They are forced to live in a climate of fear, desperation and humiliation.

Migrants with children, who lost a spouse, are worse off but do not dare to go back to Burma as they have heard reports that migrants returning from the tsunami-affected areas have been arrested, fined, imprisoned or forced to dig graves. Currently, the Thai authorities are not arresting or deporting migrants back to Burma.

Due to the humanitarian crisis in the area, most migrants are not engaged in paid employment. Employed

migrants are not receiving regular pay since their employers also suffered huge losses during the tsunami. Relief is provided as an intermediary form of survival for migrants waiting for paid work to become available.

Many employers have lost family members and their livelihood, and have become stressed and financially insecure. As a result, some employers are unable, and sometimes unwilling, to pay migrants. Coercion has been reported where employers have not allowed migrants to leave the work sites at fishing areas.

Migrants who lost their ID cards during the tsunami, or whose employers who were holding their cards, died during the tsunami receive assistance from the TAG team, a migrants' rights NGO, at Takuapa District office. They helped search for the details of their registration for a temporary ID card, and the district office re-issued the cards. To date, 93 migrants have had their cards re-issued.

About 7,000 migrants registered in Takuapa district for the temporary ID card. Of them, 5,139 registered for a work permit. The total number of migrants who registered for the temporary card in all the districts of Phang-nga was 30,572 (20,391 men and 10,181 women).

The process of re-issuing cards is slow due to many factors. Migrants are spread out throughout the country, and they get information mainly by word of mouth. Also, they are still intimidated to meet Thai authorities. There are technical problems: lack of staff and office space, an old computer-search mechanism, and need for Burmese-speaking volunteers. Solving these problems would speed up the process of re-issuing cards to, at least, 130 a day. Currently, it is limited to 10 cards a day.

The Thai government must ensure protection of aid workers who are facilitating the return or re-registration of migrants. Burmese migrants who have organized themselves into outreach teams are facing harassment and arrest, and yet they are the only people who speak the same language and who other migrants will trust, the only people who could find the migrants in their hiding places to ensure they had food and shelter. Three Burmese World Vision aid workers, one of them a woman, were locked up in a cage in Baan Tab Lamu fishing village in Phang Nga province because the employer was angry with them for facilitating Burmese migrant workers to go back home after the tsunami.

The following are the main concerns of the migrant women:

- With most migrants hiding in the jungles, it is obvious they do not have access to basic medical assistance and have problems accessing food.
- Most migrant women do not have access to reproductive health services.
- Many expecting mothers do not have access to prenatal care and safe delivery.
- Mothers with young children need better nutrition; mothers with low breast milk production need regular milk supplies for their children.
- Tsunami survivors do need psychological counselling or mental healthcare, which is not available to them.
- There are a lot of male migrants who lost their wives and are taking care of their children. They need special assistance. On the island of Koh Khao, a man was taking care of three children (3- and 7-year old and an 8-month baby), and the children were sick.

The full report put together by APWLD can be downloaded from http://www.apwld.org/tsunami_humanrights.htm

Useful websites with information on gender and disaster

UNIFEM

<http://www.unifem.org/campaigns/tsunami/>

The website provides useful resources and articles on gender and disaster, as well as links to other relevant websites.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

<http://www.unfpa.org/emergencies/pacific/index.htm>

The website provides information on UNFPA's response to the tsunami disaster, and in helping ensure that the special needs of women and youth are factored into the design and delivery of short- and medium-term humanitarian efforts.

Disaster Watch

<http://disasterwatch.net/index.htm>

The website provides information on various resources available on women and disaster, including on short films about the roles women have played in post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)

<http://www.apwld.org>

APWLD has put together a report *Women's Human Rights Concerns in Tsunami-affected Countries*, a joint effort of women's organizations and groups involved in relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in the countries affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami.

YEMAYA

ICSF's Newsletter on Gender and Fisheries

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Please do send us comments and suggestions to make the newsletter more relevant. We would also like names of other people who could be interested in being part of this initiative. We look forward to hearing from you and to receiving regular write-ups for the newsletter.

Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer