First-hand report

Forgotten tsunami victims: Burmese immigrants in Thailand

John Hulme
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One group of tsunami victims has been virtually ignored. Tens of thousands of Burmese immigrants were working in the southern areas of Thailand—either in the tourist resorts or on fishing boats—when the tsunami hit on December 26. Rather than receiving help and assistance, many have suffered persecution, police harassment and deportation.

During a 10-day visit last month to the southern Thai province of Phangnga, it was evident that the plight of Burmese immigrants was desperate. Many are "illegal" and with no papers are open to arrest. The police were carrying out raids on the shanties and refugee camps in the area. Some immigrants were hiding deep in the jungle in the hills or on rubber plantations, too afraid to seek medical attention or food, or to look for their relatives.

According to Htoo Chit, Coordinator of the Grassroots HRE & Development Committee (Burma), there were 31,353 registered Burmese workers just in Phangnga and an estimated 60,000 more who were unregistered. He said that up to 3,000 Burmese may have perished in the six provinces affected by the tsunami.

Most Burmese victims were receiving no humanitarian assistance. The Thai Red Cross said it would supply food and clothing, but most immigrants were unwilling to go for fear of arrest. The Grassroots HRE & Development Committee (Burma) was providing essential food and water to some survivors. However, with only eight workers, the organisation's capacity was limited.

In the first week after the tsunami, Wat Pasan (a temple) in Khruraburi, Phangnga Province, provided food and clothing to Burmese migrants. After the police roundup began, it was unsafe to go to the temple. The Raks Thai Foundation provided basic aid to 20 Burmese families in Koruburi. Some employers also helped out.

World Vision representatives were providing emergency healthcare but pulled out of Phangnga after threats to their lives. On January 12, a World Vision doctor and two volunteers—all Burmese—were seized, detained and beaten by a kamnan or local employer and ended up in hospital. World Vision had been trying to arrange safe passage for 40 Burmese workers to return to Burma. But the kamnan was angry at losing his workforce.

The bodies of many of the deceased Burmese were left unclaimed in Yanyao temple in Phangnga, where unidentified bodies are being kept, as relatives fear being deported. As of January 18, over 2,000 Burmese had already been arrested and sent back to Burma. A Ranong ferryboat owner said that up to 2,500 Burmese have returned to their country of their own volition.

An article posted on the website *Irrawaddy.org* explained: "The normal procedure for the deportation of illegal aliens is to first put them before a court. But in the wake of the disaster, Burmese deportees from southern Thailand have been simply herded into detention centres, then loaded onto boats without recourse to the judiciary."

A report in *USA Today* explained the case of Won, a Burmese worker who lost his work permit when the tsunami struck. He reported the loss to a Burmese social worker but when Thai immigration officials raided the camp, he was detained along with 21 others. He was loaded into the back of a pickup truck and carted off to an immigration centre two hours from

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Phangnga. Forty other Burmese were being held at the detention centre; some packed into a truck with bars over the windows, others crammed a cell. His fate is unknown.

Burmese immigrants are among the most oppressed workers in Thailand. They work in dirty, dangerous and difficult jobs in the fishing and construction industries, rubber plantations, dockyards and shrimp farms, as well as providing cheap labour for the tourist industry. Alongside the five-star tourist hotels and resorts in Phangnga were the camps and shanties occupied by Burmese immigrants.

I accompanied a group of NGO (non-government organisation) officials seeking out Burmese people living in shanties that were not hit by the tsunami. Often they were living in a row of houses or rooms with the outer walls made of corrugated tin sheeting and canvas roofs and inner walls. There was no clean water and poor sanitation. A 3 amp electrical supply gave sufficient power to light the rooms with a florescent tube.

Most of the children were sick with diarrhea due to the lack of sanitation and clean drinking water. At the time of writing, few of these communities were receiving any medical assistance. The Thai Red Cross and other aid organisations had set up medical tents on roadsides. But with rumours of deportation and arrest, only the seriously ill were prepared to take the risk.

At one community behind Kuak Kak beach, I spoke to Than So, a 26-year-old forklift driver at a rubber factory. His wife Mi Htay had been working at the Theptaro Lagoon Beach Resort on the day of the tsunami. He has not seen her since. She was six months pregnant and Than So assumed she was dead. Even though he has a work permit and a temporary stay ID card, he was unwilling to look for her and run the risk of being picked up by Thai authorities and deported.

In addition to poverty and police harassment, Burmese immigrants confront prejudice and persecution. An article in *Khao Sod* newspaper on January 8 claimed that over a thousand Burmese looters in pickups were stripping the area of Khao Lak bare. The article was headlined “Maung Thieves”—Maung being a derogatory term for Burmese.

No evidence was provided. Certainly when I was in Khao Lak there was no sign of large numbers of looters—Burmese or Thai—in pickups stripping the place bare. The tsunami had already done that. Close to the shoreline the devastation was almost total. Some buildings on higher ground were intact. But for up to a kilometre from the sea, there was evidence of serious damage.

In the *Bangkok Post* on January 11, Surapong Kongchantuk, a member of the Law Society of Thailand, tried to counter the witchhunt against Burmese, saying that it was mostly Thais who were committing crimes in tsunami affected areas. Out of 27 recent arrests for theft and break and entry, 20 were Thai nationals. Whatever their nationality, it was hardly a picture of mass looting.

The deliberate stirring up of racialist sentiment is designed to create the climate for even greater repression against Burmese immigrants, many of whom were involved in helping the victims of the disaster. An NGO reported that Western tourists thanked resort workers who helped them out, by saying that the Thai people were very kind. They were surprised to find they were speaking to Burmese and shocked when told of the conditions under which the workers worked and lived.

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