

200,000 Cambodians flee Thailand amid military crackdown

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At least 200,000 Cambodian migrant workers have fled Thailand since the start of the month, with tens of thousands continuing to cross the border every day. The mass exodus comes amid a crackdown on immigrants, especially those from Cambodia, by Thailand's military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), which seized power in a coup on May 22.

Army spokesperson Sirichan Ngathong told the media on June 11: "We see illegal workers as a threat because there were a lot of them and no clear measures to handle them, which could lead to social problems." She said anyone in the country illegally "will be arrested and deported."

The junta is scapegoating one of the most vulnerable sections of the working class and whipping up nationalism and xenophobia in order to divide workers and divert attention from its sweeping attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

The generals have heavily censored the media, suspended the constitution, banned public gatherings and postponed elections at least 15 months. They have detained hundreds of people, mostly members of the ousted Pheu Thai Party government and its protest arm, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), as well as a number of people who have taken part in anti-coup protests.

At the same time, social tensions are rising. The military regime is planning a series of austerity measures targeting the working class and rural poor. The economy shrank by 2.1 percent in the first three months of this year and is on the verge of recession. Last Friday, coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha announced the scrapping of subsidies for rice farmers, on which millions of families depend.

An estimated three million foreigners work in

Thailand, mostly from Burma, Cambodia and Laos. They include about 800,000 undocumented workers, who are exploited as ultra-cheap labour, particularly in agricultural, fishing and construction industries, where they frequently face brutal treatment and have no legal protections.

More than 400,000 Cambodians, documented and undocumented, were working in Thailand before the coup. As well as those who have fled, many who remain in the country have gone into hiding, the *Bangkok Post* reported on Monday.

The NCPO has apparently been taken aback by the rapid flood of migrants out of the country, which threatens to further destabilise the economy on both sides of the border. Junta spokesman Winthai Suvari yesterday told the media there were "no troops hunting migrant workers in Thailand." Cambodia's ambassador to Thailand, Eat Sophea, told Agence France-Presse it was "not the policy of the current administration to crack down on labourers regardless of their (legal) status." Both statements are contradicted by numerous reports.

Last week, the Thai army began rounding up Cambodians en masse, putting them in crowded trucks and driving them across the border, according to the *Cambodia Daily*. Many more migrants are now fleeing out of fear of forced deportation or detention, or because they have been sacked by their employers. The Cambodian border city of Poipet has been overwhelmed with tens of thousands of people, many stranded without any money.

On June 12, the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) said some migrants reported being physically abused and robbed by Thai soldiers, and there were "credible witness accounts" that up to nine have been killed.

The ADHOC stated: “Returnees have reported violent raids on houses where illegal immigrants are suspected of residing and incidences of the tearing up of documentation entitling Cambodians to work legally in the country.” Spokesperson Soum Chankea told the *Cambodia Daily* that two people were shot to death when they tried to stop soldiers tearing up their work permits.

So far there are no signs of a similar mass deportation or exodus of Burmese workers, who number more than a million in Thailand. Hundreds of undocumented Burmese have been arrested, however, most of them in the border area in Mae Sot, as well as in Bangkok and Mahachai.

The Thai political elite and military leaders have a history of stirring up anti-Cambodian sentiment for domestic purposes. In 2011, the military engaged in a series of armed clashes over the disputed border near Cambodia’s Preah Vihear Hindu temple. Thousands of people were displaced and about 20 Thai and Cambodian soldiers died in clashes. Sections of the Thai military were widely suspected of deliberately provoking the crisis in an attempt to derail the then-Democrat Party government’s plans for an early election, which the Pheu Thai Party was expected to win (and ultimately did win).

Just days after taking power, the junta re-ignited tensions on May 28 by erecting a barbed wire fence near Preah Vihear. The Cambodian government claims that the fence passes through disputed territory.

Anti-Cambodian propaganda featured prominently in the seven-month campaign to destabilise the Pheu Thai government, which paved the way for the coup. The campaign involved protests led by the so-called People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and supported by the opposition Democrat Party, as well as a series of bogus court cases against the government.

The PDRC represents Thailand’s traditional elites—particularly the military and the monarchy—who supported the coup against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, as well as the 2006 coup that removed her brother, billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra. The Bangkok elites turned against Thaksin after he moved to open the economy to more foreign investment, cutting across their own vested interests. They also bitterly opposed the Shinawatras’ limited concessions to the urban and rural poor—including the rice farmer subsidies, cheap

healthcare and a micro-loan scheme.

After fleeing Thailand in 2008 to avoid being jailed on a trumped-up corruption charge, Thaksin in 2009 became an economic advisor to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. The PDRC’s campaign centred on claims that Yingluck’s government was controlled by Thaksin, in league with Phnom Penh. In January, PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban accused the government—without a shred of evidence—of enlisting a Cambodian “special warfare unit” to carry out attacks on PDRC rallies.

The junta’s provocative anti-Cambodian campaign has attracted virtually no criticism internationally. Washington, which tacitly supported the coup, has remained silent. The Obama administration regards Thailand, particularly the armed forces, as an important ally in its “pivot” to Asia—its drive to militarily encircle and subordinate China. It responded to the military’s seizure of power with a token cutback of \$4.7 million in aid.



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