



Khun Mint spins in circles on his small motorcycle, joyfully kicking up gravel on a rural road just south of Bangkok, Thailand. It's hard to express the excitement he feels to have two feet squarely on land.

That's because the 23 year-old Burmese migrant laborer spent the last year working on a Thai fishing boat. It was the worst year of his life he says, one that comes racing back whenever he hears a horn, the sound that rang in his every day at sea. "Whenever I hear a car honk, I feel like I was going back from freedom back to the prison. I started seeing all the bad things, all the fish, all the torture all over again in my mind." [\(Read about whether a peaceful rally could signal real reform in Burma.\)](#)

Based on Thai government statistics, there are an estimated 2 to 3 million Burmese working in Thailand. Many of the original wave of migrants came during political turmoil in the late 1980s, but the vast majority arrived in the last decade, for economic reasons. Corruption, international sanctions, and government mismanagement have strangled the Burmese economy. Most importantly, to young Burmese like Khun Mint, the country ranks near the bottom 10% in terms of per capita GDP. So people leave, by the thousands, often with the help of what some migrant labor rights advocates worry is a growing human trafficking network.

What most Burmese migrants find in Thailand is not the fortune they imagined. Around half wind up in garment factories near the border, where they work 80 hour weeks, but often make only around \$2 a day. Others find slightly higher paying work on farms, and at constructions sites. The best paying but worst-case scenario for Burmese women is prostitution. The equivalent in both respects for the men is commercial fishing boats, where they can make as much as \$200 a month, but face brutal work conditions. [\(Read why being forced into military labor is almost like being sentenced to death in Burma.\)](#)

Khun Mint says two years ago he had made up his mind to head to Thailand, but he needed

help. When he reached Mayawatti, the Northeastern town that borders Mae Sot, Thailand, he met what many refer to as a "broker" or "recruiter" at a barbershop. The man helped him cross the river into Thailand, for a fee to be paid later, and from there, he eventually was led to a fishing village in the South. After a week spent locked up in a safe house run by a Thai woman, Khun Mint was sold by a trafficker to a ship's captain, for 22,000 Thai Baht, around \$800. That money recuperated the broker's cost for transporting Khun Mint, and then some.

The young Burmese man essentially worked as slave labor the first six months, paying off his debt. Conditions were horrible, he says, thanks in part to enforcers on the boat, who carried what Khun Mint refers to as the, "stingray." "When you're casting the net or pulling it back up, if he see something he doesn't like, or even randomly, he'll start whipping you. It's like that."

[Read about whether Thailand send Burmese refugees back.](#)

Khun Mint says he was forced to work through a bad injury, got little rest, and was even coerced into taking amphetamines, to help him cast nets for longer hours.

So why didn't he leave?

He claims he had heard rumors that the police would arrest him, steal whatever money or valuables he had, and either sell him back to the ship's captain, or deport him. Andy Hall, a foreign expert on migrant labor issues at Mahidol University in Bangkok, says such shakedowns are common: "There's been systematic corruption, discrimination, exploitation, migrants are treated like walking ATMs." [\(Read about Burmese refugees finding solace in Thailand.\)](#)

Mo Swe, a Burmese political activist now living in Thailand says migrants are willing to put up with a lot, because the reality of being back home sounds even worse. "One reason is there is no employment in Burma. Another problem is different kinds of human rights abuses. Another reason is the lifestyle here. Electricity and water supply for 24 hours. The living standard is high. They can have light, they can watch the TV."

The plight of Burmese migrants in Thailand is becoming a more mainstream topic these days. In June the Thai government began a registration drive attempting to get as many foreign workers legalized as possible. Hall says getting formalized can make a big difference. "You can avoid a lot of exploitation by the police, you are protected more, you can negotiate with your employer more." ([Read more about Burma's minorities.](#))

Around a million Burmese workers turned out for the recently completed government survey. Hall says it's anybody's guess how many Burmese workers didn't register. He says many don't have a formal employer, are unemployed, or have employers who don't want to cover their registration fees. He says registrations aside, the main need is for a cultural shift in how migrant laborers are viewed and treated. "So unless we see a real change of attitude by Thai employers, by Thai officials, by the Thai population as a whole, then a lot of these positive developments will not have the impact they should have."

For his part, Khun Mint says he's happy to still be in Thailand, but glad his fishing days are in the past. "Working with someone who doesn't value human life, who don't treat people well. It's not worth the dangers."

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