



Authorities in Myawaddy, a border town in Burma's Karen State opposite Mae Sot, Thailand, have taken action against members of a Border Guard Force (BGF) who have been extorting money from Burmese migrant workers fleeing flooding in Thailand, according to border sources.

In recent weeks, as the number of migrant workers returning to Burma has increased from the hundreds to the thousands per day amid Thailand's worst flooding in decades, the BGF members and others acting as their agents have been demanding 2,500 baht (US \$80) from each migrant worker crossing the border at Gate 10 in Myawaddy's Ward 5, the sources said.

The BGF, formed by the former Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), controls the border gate, which is one of more than 20 used as unofficial checkpoints for entering and leaving Burma. The main entry point, on the Friendship Bridge connecting Myawaddy and Mae Sot, has been closed for more than a year because of a border dispute, although there were reports today that it had been reopened to allow those fleeing the flooding to return.

According to a trader based at Gate 10, the Myawaddy authorities launched the crackdown over the weekend under direct orders from Naypyidaw. He said that most of the extortionists had fled to Thailand to escape arrest, and that the police were now in control of the gate. Returning migrants were also being offered free transportation to Hpa-an, the Karen State capital, he added.

Most of those forced to pay the extortionists had been arrested in Thailand while attempting to reach the border, in most cases for traveling without official documentation.

"Nearly 3,000 Burmese migrant workers have been returning to Burma via Mae Sot every day since the middle of October. About two-thirds of them are deportees arrested by the Thai

authorities for illegally staying in Thailand,” said the trader.

Although the sudden exodus of flood refugees returning to Burma has put a spotlight on the mistreatment of migrant workers on both sides of the border, the problems at Gate 10 started more than 10 months ago, when DKBA Battalion 999 became part of a BGF under Burmese military command, with control over Gate 10.

“They have been forcing people to pay 2,500 baht each to reenter the country since the beginning of the year. Nobody dared complain about it. It's only now, after reports in the Burmese exiled media, that the authorities are taking any action,” said the trader.

Meanwhile, activists in Thailand say that migrants in Mae Sot are at a growing risk of arrest, as the town, with a large and well-established Burmese community, becomes the focal point of a crackdown on unregistered foreign workers.

In a statement released today, Jackie Pollock, the director of the Chiang Mai-based MAP Foundation, said that local authorities “have declared a witch hunt on undocumented migrant workers” in the town.

“The local authorities, seemingly ignoring what is happening in the rest of Thailand, have announced their annual post-registration crackdown on undocumented migrants,” said Pollock. “The result will be chaos.”

In Bangkok, meanwhile, the Burmese embassy said that it has been calling on the Thai authorities not to arrest migrants who can't show their ID cards. According to Naing Tun, an embassy official, the embassy has also been helping in other ways, such as cooperating with the Thai Labor Ministry and granting temporary travel documents to migrants who have lost their documents because of the floods.

He said the process of issuing new documents is being carried out at a rescue center in Nakhon Pathom Province, north of Bangkok, where the embassy is also providing food and shelter to Burmese flood victims.

Arkar Soe, a Burmese migrant and a victim of the flooding, said that most donations of food and other supplies being distributed by the Thai authorities are only offered to Thai citizens and those who can provide proof of their citizenship.

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