



BANGKOK—“They are using the opportunity to exploit workers,” says Aung, slamming Thai immigration officials and Burmese brokers for extorting Burmese migrants fleeing Thailand's worst flooding for half-a-century. “I have never seen anything as bad as this,” he added.

Aung used to work as a broker in Thailand, part of a sometimes-reviled network who, for an often substantial fee, help migrants find work and living quarters in Thailand. Unscrupulous members of the profession often collude with traffickers on both sides of the border as well as brutally exploitative employers in Thailand.

Leaked information from inside the immigration detention centre near Mae Sot—the main land border crossing between Thailand and Burma—suggests that 30,000 Burmese trying to head home have been detained there during recent weeks, as floods close factories and inundate their often ramshackle homes.

Those with full official migrant worker accreditation in Thailand generally can do their border crossing without excessive hassle. However, for those whose ID only permits them to live in the area where their employment is based, or for those without any documentation, fleeing the floods is only the start of their ordeal.

“In Samut Sakhon [a fishing port 40 minutes southwest of Bangkok with tens of thousands of Burmese fisheries workers] brokers charge 2,400 baht for travel to Mae Sot,” said ex-broker Aung.

“They then load 150 people onto a truck with room for no more than 50,” he added. Then they

make the eight or nine-hour road trip to the border.

Once there, those without papers are detained by police and immigration officials and can be “fined” for breaches of their work permits, before being deported overnight across the border into Burma. They are then easy prey for traffickers such as the Karen border guard force—formerly the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)—an Karen ethnic militia affiliated to the Burmese Army.

However, it is not just the informal shakedowns that are devastating Burmese migrants and those working to assist them. Aung says that all formal costs for migrants wanting to return home should be waived during the flooding crisis, not only as a charitable gesture but also as an additional preventive measure against traffickers and exploitative brokers.

“Removing all formal costs for migrants returning home, whether re-entry permit costs or travel costs, must be immediate. Otherwise migrants who have suffered once in this disaster will suffer again, at increased risk of trafficking and debt bondage,” he said.

The Burmese authorities have protected key gates during the daytime, and have been providing food and water transport onward to Pa'an inside Burma, as well 4,500 kyat to the returning migrants, according to sources at the border.

However, now it appears that deportations from the Thai side at Mae Sot are taking place during the night, according to separate anonymous accounts to The Irrawaddy.

“Night time deportations are dangerous, international standards dictate deportations should be taking place only in the day. Night-time deportations have to stop,” said Andy Hall, a migration policy expert at Mahidol University in Bangkok.

In areas of flood-devastated Pathum Thani, a suburb on the northern outskirts of the vast Thai capital, mafia figures are keeping Burmese migrants as virtual prisoners in waist-high water, now sitting stagnant and stinking for up to two weeks.

“If they want to leave, they have to pay,” said another NGO worker who helps Burmese migrants in the area, adding that just five to 10 percent of the Burmese workers which usually live there now remain. “But many have no valid papers,” he added.

However, it is not just shady mafia figures who are taking advantage of migrants to make a quick buck on the back of the flooding. “One employer in Pathum Thani wanted 7,500 baht from migrants who needed their passports returned to go home to Burma,” explained the NGO worker. Thai employers often hold the passports of migrant staff as a means of control.

“I spoke to this man on October 29-30, and he eventually agreed not to charge for giving them their passports back.”

With two-three million Burmese migrants in Thailand, there are around one million living in flood-affected areas, according to the Thailand Labour Ministry. “Nobody really knows how many migrants are affected by the floods,” said Hall. “Some say 200,000, some say at least double that.”

Despite this high number, there appears to be only one shelter for Burmese migrants affected by the crisis, with around 200-400 people taking refuge at the Wat Rai Khing in Nakhon Pathom outside Bangkok.

For Aung, the former broker, the situation is too much.

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