

AYUTTHAYA, Thailand – With no money or identity documents and stranded in a foreign land for days on end without food and water, they are the forgotten people of Thailand's flood disaster.

Evacuation is not an option for hundreds of Myanmar migrant workers marooned in the newly formed swamps and road-rivers that cover industrialised central Thailand.

Many are in Thailand illegally, but even the legitimate migrants fear arrest or becoming victims of extortion by Thai and Myanmar border officials and opportunist mafia gangs.

"We have to take care of ourselves, we share the little food we have, but that's gone," said Show Tae, 34, who worked in a factory making pizza bases before water rushed in a month ago.

"We can't go home because we have no money and if I go back to Myanmar, there's no work there either."

In provinces like Ayutthaya, 100 kilometres (65 miles) north of Bangkok, hundreds of Myanmar are trying to ride out Thailand's worst floods in half a century, crammed into apartment blocks with no electricity and relying on a few aid groups to navigate submerged roads to deliver food, water and medical supplies.

Homes and shops have been destroyed, and industrial estates housing hundreds of factories have been forced to shut down, leaving 650,000 people jobless. More than 400 people have been killed and two million affected since July.

People like Show Tae are not the priority, however, as authorities, troops and relief workers battle to reach thousands of Thais cut off by water as deep as 2m in provinces like Ayutthaya, Pathum Thani and Nakhon Sawan.

Many Thais are in evacuation centres, or camped out along highways, sleeping in small tents, the back of parked trucks or under plastic sheets, but food and water is available.

Families are crammed into boats, rowing along roads and through rice fields with a backdrop of warehouses, tractors and bulldozers partially submerged by the muddy, foul-smelling water that has left this province looking like a coastal area.

For Myanmar migrants, the situation is even more dire. Activists say migrant workers hit by floods – a crucial part of Thailand's US\$319 billion economy – have been largely ignored.

"They have no one, nowhere to go and the factory owners can't take care of them," said Laddawan Tantivitayapitak of the Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma (TACDB), which was delivering food supplies to the Myanmar victims on November 1.

"Many lost their documents and money in the floods. Other chose to flee but were arrested."

About 250 Myanmar are believed to be receiving help in shelters, but tens of thousands more were affected by the flooding.

The Labour Ministry estimates there are more than one million foreign migrant workers in Bangkok and surrounding provinces, including those who are registered and those working illegally. Those with documentation are not permitted to travel beyond the provinces in which they are employed.

Win, 19, a registered worker at the pizza base factory who was born in Thailand but does not have citizenship, said she and her colleagues were destitute and living in fear.

“We no longer have work but my friends have no choice but to wait,” she said. “They’re too scared to leave.”

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