

Burmese Authorities Issue 'Passports' to Migrants
By LAWI WENG Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Burma has started issuing new nationality identification papers to Burmese migrant workers, allowing them to work legally in Thailand but not in other countries, according to a Burmese immigration official in Myawaddy Township, on the Thai-Burmese border.

"We opened the office on June 5," said the official, who added that each worker has to pay 3,000 kyat (US \$3) for an application form and will have to pay taxes on their earnings in Thailand.

Many Burmese migrant workers who illegally entry into Thailand end up at the prison cell of the police stations. (Photo: Reuters)

The Burmese government recently reached an agreed with Thailand to open three registration offices for migrant laborers in the Burmese border towns of Myawaddy, Tachilek and Kawthaung, according to the official.

The new identification papers, which the official referred to as "passport documents," will effectively grant successful applicants a one-year work permit in Thailand. To receive the document, a Burmese migrant worker must have a letter of recommendation from a Thai factory or business.

Burmese migrants who are working in Thailand and who want to apply for these new passport documents will have to bring all their information, including their ID cards, to these centers.

Jackie Pollock, a founding member of the Migrant Assistance Program (MAP) in Thailand, said that the new passports, which cannot be used for travel to any other country besides Thailand, are far short of what migrants need.

"I don't want them to have temporary passports," she said. "I want them to have real passports, which they can use to travel to any country."

Pollock also said that Thai immigration authorities in Chiang Mai started conducting a survey of Burmese migrants last week to find out how many intended to return to Burma to get the passport.

However, sources close to the migrant community said that many who were taking part in the survey were reluctant to provide their real addresses in Burma for fear that the information could be used by the Burmese authorities to target family members still in the country.

Thailand and Burma agreed to set up nationality identification centers for Burmese migrant workers in 2006. However, the two countries couldn't reach an agreement on where the registration centers would be situated.

Originally, the Burmese authorities wanted them to be located in Pa-an and Moulmein, the capitals of Karen and Mon states, respectively. However, their Thai

counterparts objected, as these towns were too far for the workers to travel to and from.

The Thai government has said it hopes that the new registration process will help stop the influx of illegal Burmese migrants into Thailand by offering the opportunity to work in the country legally.

According to MAP, Thailand hosts 2-4 million migrant workers—some legal, but most illegal—from Burma, Cambodia and Laos. However, the country still faces a severe labor shortage and is unable to meet growing industrial demands, prompting officials to frequently revise registration procedures.

The governments of Laos and Cambodia operate nationality identification centers in Thailand in cooperation with the Thai government. The centers have so far processed some 70,000 Lao and Cambodia workers and registered them with the Thai Labor Department. They are eligible to work in Thailand and have access to the same social welfare benefits as Thai workers, including legal support and medical services for their children.

Burmese workers who have the new passports will also be eligible for the same benefits, according to officials. However, critics of Thailand's migrant labor policies said that even foreign workers who are formally registered typically receive substandard treatment when seeking benefits.

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