

# Situation Assessment of Migrants in the Tsunami-Affected Province of Phang Nga

*Assessed by:* Action Network for Migrants (ANM)  
*Date of report:* January 26, 2005



---

## The Assessment

The Action Network for Migrants (ANM) organized a rapid assessment team to survey the needs and situation of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand's tsunami affected province of Phang Nga from 9-15 January, 2005. The assessment team separated into two groups, one focused on advocacy with local officials and employers, and the other conducted direct interviews with Burmese migrants.

## Main Findings

**Security is a primary concern for migrants, and the re-issuing of ID's and work permits is urgent.**

- When the waves struck, many migrants lost their ID and work permits or their jobs or both. Without proper identification, migrants are susceptible to arrest and deportation.
- Migrants and employers want work permits and temporary ID's that were lost in the tsunami to be re-issued. The Department of Employment has agreed, but is uncertain whether they have the resources and has thus been slow in pursuing this task. In addition to fear of arrest, migrants also face other obstacles in accessing these services such as transportation and language.

**Many migrants have been repatriated to Burma and many others have returned independently.**

- In the first week after the tsunami, the police arrested migrants without valid ID and reportedly deported them. Officially, 675 migrants from the tsunami-affected provinces have been repatriated through Ranong; out of that total, 476 were from Phang Nga. It is suspected that the numbers repatriated are higher than this, and there are still an undisclosed number in detention.
- There is a concern that a proper screening process was not used in the repatriation process to check for migrants who were registered and had lost their ID or only had a photocopy (registered migrants are officially permitted to remain in the country until August of 2005). The UNHCR was not involved in the repatriation process.
- Many other migrants returned across the border independently - up to 2,500 according to one eyewitness at the border. Migrants independently returning expressed a need to be with their families to recover from the shock of the

tsunami, or said that their work had been wiped out and they had no where to stay. Many expressed a desire to return to Thailand to work again in the near future.

**Officials have under-stated the severity of loss of life among migrants.**

- According to the assessment team, it is estimated that in Takuapa district of Phang Nga Province alone, 2,500 migrants could be dead and possibly 7,000 are missing or unaccounted. The total number of migrants killed in the province could possibly even exceed 5,000. Due to the large number of migrants that were undocumented, the fact that survivors have fled or are in hiding, and the extreme difficulty in safely communicating with families in Burma, the actual number of migrants dead and missing may never be known.
- There has been no effort to identify corpses in storage that are suspected to be migrants, and migrants have not had access to bodies even when there has been positive identification. There is concern that bodies of migrants may not be treated with the same respect as those that have been identified as being foreigner or Thai.

**Migrants who survived have received little public relief or aid assistance.**

- In the first week there were government camps that provided relief to all who came, however, there were no standards issued and there was some discrimination against migrants. Although some migrants were able to access aid freely in the first week, especially at local temples, there were reports of Thai aid providers at turning away migrants saying that relief was not for “Burmese.” Within the first week, crackdowns and repatriation effectively cleared out all migrants from public relief camps. Reportedly, in the first couple of days, some migrants received the 2,000 Baht provided through the Government’s Urgent Assistance Fund, but no migrants have received these funds since then.
- World Vision Foundation of Thailand (WVFT) was already established in these areas working with migrants through the PHAMIT project, and was initially the only NGO to provide direct relief to migrants, serving at least 540 migrants in the first week. Since Jan. 14th, WVFT has closed all operations in Phang Nga for security reasons. The ANM team provided supplementary assistance to over 60 families during the assessment. Currently, the Tsunami Action Group (TAG), a group of NGOs and CBOs including members of ANM and the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), is providing migrants with relief and legal assistance in re-issuing temporary IDs and work permits.
- It should be noted that the phone at the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok has gone unanswered since Dec. 26<sup>th</sup>, and the Myanmar government has provided no assistance in any form to migrants.

**There is concern that migrants displaced by the tsunami are receiving inadequate nutrition as they have become highly mobile and are primarily relying on personal networks and employers for support.**

- Upon being turned out from camps or hearing that migrants were being arrested and repatriated, many migrants fled to hilltops, plantations, constructions sites and communities of migrants in other locales for refuge. There they have relied on friends, family and Thai employers to provide food and shelter. Migrants in refuge may not be receiving proper nutritional levels as migrants’ limited resources are being stretched, and employers may not be giving proper rations to migrants they are sheltering. This is especially of concern for new mothers and young children, as the team encountered two new mothers, and many children under the age of six

in these communities. It is believed that some migrants have also gone to neighboring provinces in search of work or to stay with friends and family.

**Migrants have become more vulnerable to exploitation, coercion and violence at the hands of employers, police and mafia gangs.**

- Many employers have lost family members and their livelihood, and have become stressed and financially insecure. As a result, some employers are unable, and others are unwilling, to give migrants back pay. Coercion has been reported, where employers have not allowed migrants to leave the work site at fishing areas; and on construction sites, employers have provided basic relief, culturally obliging migrants to stay.
- In some cases, it was reported that employers used migrants to loot devastated areas, telling migrants that it was the employer's property. Although Thai media reported that migrants were looting and raping, at a police station in Phang Nga, it was found that out of 27 arrested for looting, only seven were Burmese and the other were Thai. In Phuket, there was a report of an employer killing a migrant who had been used in this way in order to silence him. There is no denial that some Burmese migrants have stolen items, however, it is usually out of desperation and has not been large scale or systematic looting.
- Violence has also been used to intimidate migrants into remaining. One incident involved aid workers from World Vision Foundation of Thailand. On Jan. 12<sup>th</sup> at Tablamu village, a local gang, with the support of local authorities, held three health assistants from WVFT in a cage, threatened to kill them, and eventually beat them and the Project Coordinator, to the point where they required hospitalization.
- Migrants who have already returned back to Thailand have reported paying protection money to organized gangs. Brokers are also capitalizing on migrants who already wish to return to find work in Thailand with one report of interest rates at 30 percent a week being charged on fees. There were also reports of police confiscating migrants' personal possessions, including money and gold either upon arrest or during repatriation.

**Situation Prior to the Tsunami**

In Phang Nga Province, 31,353 migrants, mostly all from Burma, had registered for temporary ID cards, including dependents and children; out of this total, 22,668 had registered for work permits. Categories of registered migrants most immediately affected by the tsunami were fishermen with 1,928 registered, and seafood processing with 462 registered. Another 1,755 were registered under construction, much of which was being done in resort areas along the beach. Job categories that were *least* likely to have been registered included fishermen and construction workers, and thus the actual numbers could be up to twice as high as the numbers documented in these categories. Under the last registration, there were also 41 officially working in ice factories, many of which provide ice for the seafood industry, 483 registered as domestic workers, which may include cleaning personnel for bungalows, and 1,224 registered under miscellaneous, a category where some sex-workers, manual laborers and those working in small shops or in restaurants were sometimes included.

The hardest hit location was Baan Nam Khem in Takuapa District. It is estimated that there could have been at least 2,000 up to 7,000 migrants working in the area, with up to one thousand on boats, up to 700 working in entertainment places, around one thousand on the island of Ko Koh Khao working in bungalows, as well as thousands working and living in the community with families and children. In the resort areas of Takuapa, migrants worked in construction, seafood processing and in the service industry in restaurants and hotel bungalows, cooking, cleaning and landscaping. There were forty construction sites counted, some had 400-1,200 workers (WVFT). There were also many families present in these communities with some having up to three children.

**Registered and Estimated Numbers of Migrants - Phang Nga Province (12/2004)**

<b>District (Coastal areas)</b>	<b>Temporary ID* (Includes Dependents)</b>	<b>Registered for Work Permit*</b>	<b>Estimated Actual Total Population (Prior Tsunami)</b>
Koraburi	4,206	3,063	Possibly over 6,000 migrants including children
Takuapa	7,000	5,139	Possibly over 10,000 migrants including children
Thai Mueang	<i>Not Assessed</i>	4,739	<i>Not Assessed</i>
Ko Yao	<i>Not Assessed</i>	583	<i>Not Assessed</i>

\*(Source: Department of Employment Phang Nga Province; and District Office, Takuapa)

**Dead, Missing, Injured and Repatriated**

It is possible that the numbers of Burmese migrants dead and missing would increase the official numbers considerably, possibly by the thousands; however, neither the Thai nor the Burmese governments have made mention of migrant workers or have attempted to gather this data in any meaningful way. Moreover, the ability to get an accurate estimate of numbers of missing and dead has been complicated by a number of factors. The fact that there were an unknown number of undocumented migrants present prior to the tsunami is compounded by the arrest and repatriation of migrants, which has created an atmosphere of fear and sent migrants into hiding; and many other migrants have independently returned home or are spread out over the area.



There is some anecdotal evidence on the extent of the loss of life gathered by the assessment team. On the island of Ko Koh Khao opposite Baan Nam Khem, out of the estimated one thousand previously residing there, only one hundred are left – it is uncertain how many of the missing survived. At one construction site, out of 1,000 laborers, an eyewitness reported that he had only seen seven people rescued on the site.

A glimmer of hope that may have saved a number of people is that it was “Duean Ngy”, or the full moon, when the tsunami struck, which is when boats are docked and fishermen go around visiting friends, family and entertainment places. This means that the dock area wasn’t as busy as it could have been, and it is believed that many fishermen were not on their boats at the time the tsunami struck. On the other hand, previous studies have shown that fishermen without families present, especially those who are not registered, may remain on boats when docked. Thus, it is still unclear the death toll among migrants in the fishing community. (Survivors interviewed in Baan Nam Khem indicated that they had escaped the waves because they had driven their cars to high ground in time. It is believed that those without motorized transportation were less likely to have escaped, especially migrants.)

In Baan Nam Khem, out of an estimated population of up to 7,000 workers who had been there previously, it is estimated that a little over 200 are currently present. One eye witness reported that on the second day, the police came and asked migrant survivors if they wanted help. Around 500 people answered “yes” and were subsequently put on flat bed trucks and sent away; it is unknown whether they were sent to a relief camp or simply deported.

At Wat Pasan, a Buddhist temple in Koraburi, twenty migrant families received food for the first ten days after the tsunami. The monks didn’t register them because they were afraid they would be deported, however, after that period they were told to leave for their own safety by the monks. At the time of the assessment, no migrants were in the camp.



In Takuapa relief center, as of Dec 26<sup>th</sup>, there were approximately 800 migrants seeking shelter and relief. By Dec. 30<sup>th</sup>, all of these migrants had been put on buses and sent away. It is reported that 200 were simply left at Koraburi just north of Takuapa, whereas it is uncertain where the other 600 were sent; most likely, they were deported, but this has not been confirmed. There was also a camp in Ranong that was run in collaboration between Department of Immigration, the Army, Department of Employment, World Vision Foundation of Thailand, and the Ministry of Health. The camp received people from the other provinces, mostly from Phang Nga; in total, the camp provided relief to 692 people (506 men; 139 women; and 47 children), out of which, 675 were repatriated and the remainder were hospitalized. WVFT also assisted 55 women and 45 children from Tablamu village to return to Burma in collaboration with local authorities. As of January 10<sup>th</sup>, seventy-nine Burmese migrants were registered in the Phang Nga hospital for tsunami related injuries.

## **The Survivors**

Many migrants displaced by the tsunami have become highly mobile and are utilizing their personal networks to seek refuge. There were reports by WVFT of hundreds of migrants hiding in nearby plantations, only to have a handful remaining a day later. Many migrants have sought refuge in nearby communities where friends or families live, relying on their hospitality. Unfortunately, many of these migrants are already

living on the bare minimum, and supporting extra people has become a burden. Many people from Baan Nam Khem are taking refuge in Koraburi area.

Of survivors identified as taking refuge in Koraburi, health problems are becoming more obvious, such as stomach problems and diarrhea. Another concern is mother and child health, as there are a number of women with young children. One mother had recently given birth and needed better nutrition to breastfeed, and another new mother wasn't lactating and needed powdered milk for her child. On the island of Koh Khao, a man whose wife had perished in the waves was taking care of his three children (a 3 and 7 year old and an eight month infant), and the children were sick.

There were reports of employers assisting migrant laborers by providing food supplies, especially on construction sites. Whether this is for humanitarian reasons or simply to secure their labor force is to be considered, however, most people at these sites had not received medical care, and there were complaints of dizziness, which could be a result of fatigue or possibly dehydration. Clean water sources and nutrition are also of concern, especially when large groups of migrants are sharing limited amounts of food, and when people are hiding in the jungle, or they are relying on their employers. This issue takes on weight when considering the nutritional requirements of new mothers and young children.

A boat operator at the Burmese border in Ranong said he estimated 2,500 people had independently returned across the border. Most people indicated that they were traumatized by the tsunami and needed time to go home and recover. Many also expressed that they intended to return to Thailand soon and seek work with their employer, hoping that by that time the employer would also have recovered and would be ready to employ them again.

The problem is that according to the policy set by the Ministry of Labor (MOL), once a migrant leaves the country their registration is nullified. The MOL also announced that there would not be a supplementary registration, and the next registration will not be until the middle of the year. Contrary to this, employers interviewed by the team, most in the resort area of Khoa Lak, expressed a need for at least 50,000 laborers to start rebuilding, and to rejuvenate the fishing and seafood industry in the area. The concern of the assessment team is that this will lead to even more undocumented migrant workers in the area than previously.



Some migrants who have positively identified bodies being kept in storage have been given no rights over the body, and have become distraught. There have also been rumors that officials want to unceremoniously burn the bodies of unidentified bodies suspected of being migrants. As with many survivors, closure is important, regardless of whether they are certain their loved ones are dead or not. Some Burmese migrants encountered by the team requested Buddhist ceremonies to commemorate the dead, however, there are no Burmese monks in the area. Through contacts made with labor groups in the Burmese community, a Burmese monk was found and at least three ceremonies have been provided to different groups.

# The Action Network for Migrants

*Includes the following organizations:*



Center for AIDS Rights (CAR)

Empower Foundation

Foundation for Children's Development

Friends of Women Foundation

Foundation for Women

MAP Foundation

Pattanarak Foundation

Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma (TACDB)

Raks Thai Foundation

Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association

World Vision Foundation of Thailand

Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)

**For more information please contact:**

[tagmigrants@yahoo.com](mailto:tagmigrants@yahoo.com)

[action\\_migrants@yahoo.com](mailto:action_migrants@yahoo.com)

[info@raksthai.org](mailto:info@raksthai.org)