

Covid-19 (Thailand): Migrant workers' unemployment may hinder disease control

Tuesday 7 April 2020, by [YIAMYUT Sutthichaya](#) (Date first published: 7 April 2020).

As the Thai economy is heavily impacted by government attempts to control the COVID-19 outbreak, experts believe that the situation for migrant workers may contribute to the epidemic. Proper policies and employment support are needed to set things right.

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Workers in a construction site, taken on January, 2019

It has been 2 weeks since Rachen Maung Maung, an ethnic Rohingya roti vendor (Indian snack) in Bangkok changed his way of doing business as a result of the Thai authorities' attempts to control COVID-19 outbreak.

Customers had increasingly deserted the area where he used set up his stall at night as most offices ordered employees to work from home and many businesses shut down.

"What should I do? They've closed everything; the government has closed down, the factories, big ones have no people. If there are people, they have no money." said Rachen, who instead is selling roti around his community during the day.

Migrant workers are facing a dire situation as the Thai government's attempts to enforce 'social distancing' deal a huge blow to economic activity countrywide. The service sector was the first hit by state lock-down orders, and this has now expanded to the production sector as demand dwindles.

Migration time bomb

Tens of thousands have decided to migrate back to their home countries as travel became more difficult with checkpoints put in place in the past 2 weeks. As unemployment rises, migrant workers will be less visible to the state - causing a negative impact on virus control.

Adisorn Kerdmongkol, Coordinator of the Migrant Working Group (MWG)), a network that supports the migrant population, said at least 400,000 migrant workers are likely to become illegal.

Most of those at risk have to extend their work permit. However, employers are the only ones who can do this. Otherwise the migrant workers will be left in Thailand with no legal working status.

Although cabinet resolutions passed last week allow workers to stay in Thailand legally until the countrywide Emergency Decree is lifted, unemployment will still leave them without an income. (Source: Prachachat)

Unlike Thai workers, migrants do not qualify for the monthly ad hoc support of 5,000 baht a month for 3 months. Adisorn believes that the situation may prove to be problematic.

“First, the workers are more likely to go home. That means more of them will sneak back to their home country because going back means at least having something to eat. What is concerning is that the migration will cause a greater spread of the disease from Thailand to their home countries. We found in a case in Myanmar that at least one of the infected people came from Thailand”

“Second, there will be people who have to hide in Thailand and will not be able to access any services. What is troubling is that when they are sick or become infected [with COVID-19], their access to services is less,” Adisorn said.

Adisorn suggested that the term of employment should be changed to cope up with the current conditions, for example, by allowing migrant workers to have more than one employer. The question is how to minimize unemployment while being able to undergo the difficulties together.

“Perhaps [the state] has to ensure continuous employment. Support for employers may be needed.”

“When there is a crisis like this and state budget is needed, there will be a feeling that foreigners are being helped in the same way as Thais. ‘Why don’t you help Thai people?’ There will be this kind of feeling which is quite hard to deal with while state funds are also quite limited” said Adisorn.

Amnesty for all is needed

The cabinet resolutions do not include those who work illegally. These workers do not have access to public welfare services as legal workers do. Their invisibility combined with the economic recession may have serious repercussions for disease control.

Siwawong Sooktawee, an independent researcher who wrote a thesis about the Rohingya, told Prachatai that there are many refugees who have taken refuge and work illegally in Thailand. They are not willing to show themselves for fear of being arrested.

Siyeed Alam, Chair of the Rohingya Association in Thailand, told Prachatai that currently Rohingya workers in Thailand are also struggling against unemployment as many employers told them not to come to work to prevent infection.

He said that he was contacted by 20-30 Rohingya families, asking for support as they are already short on food. The roti vendors are also heavily affected as their custom declined.

Rohingya workers are likely to stay in the shadows as they are not legally allowed to work. The Ministry of Interior had been forcing workers to undergo the proof of nationality process in their home countries. Tragically, the Myanmar government persecution against the Rohingya does not

allow them such a chance.

Rachen's story is an interesting example. He served in the Myanmar army during the cold war period. He then migrated to Thailand 42 years ago and later received a work permit. However, he could not find his Myanmar army service record when he tried to prove his nationality. So his permit has been revoked.

Siwawong suggested that the Cabinet, using the Immigration Act, allow all immigrants to stay in Thailand temporarily and later set up some form of registration to make them visible to the state.

"Exemption should be a general exemption, that is, allowing everyone who has come to Thailand, both those with documents and those without, to stay in Thailand temporarily, like declaring an amnesty. They can be arrested or re-registered when we come to it."

"If we are to put in place some measure to prevent the spread among this group of people, I think we want a cabinet resolution for leniency under Article 17 of the Immigration Act first, then, perhaps we set up a telephone-based registration process for reporting their whereabouts." said Siwawong.

Currently, Siwawong is seeking for support to Rohingya families. People who wanted to support him can contact his email siwawong@gmail.com.

Concerns along the border

Raweeporn Dokmai, coordinator of the Mae Sot Labour Law Clinic, Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF), said that people are still crossing the Thai-Myanmar border. However, the cost to enter Thailand from Myawaddy, Myanmar via Mae Sot District, Tak Province, has doubled to 1,200-1,500 baht per person as public transportation has been halted.



Myanmar workers were waiting to cross the border at Mae Sot district on January 23, 2020 (Source: Sai Tun Shwe)

She said that the migrant workers inside Thailand had increasingly become unemployed. Without any policy in place, she believed that the workers will seek to go back. The border is now seen as both arrival and departure point while proper resources to handle the issue are scarce.

As of the end of March, Raweeporn and network had contacted the leaders of many migrant communities to keep records of the migrant workers who come to take shelter with their relatives. The newcomers will receive a self-check manual and 4 emergency kits consisting of some dry food and toiletries.

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), a network working for the protection and promotion of the rights of migrants, released a statement urging the relevant authorities to take immediate action to protect and support the welfare of migrants and their families [1].

"Many migrants have been compelled to return, as remaining in Thailand, for many, means no job,

no food and a real risk of homelessness,” says the statement

“Arranging safe forms of travel to their homes is also a matter that requires immediate attention. Some communities are making their own arrangements for the return of migrants; these range from practical isolation measures to measures driven by fear, which may fuel stigmatization against returnees.”

MMN suggests that the Thai authorities enable migrants, regardless of the status, to access free public health services, create health safety guidelines in migrant languages, enact responsive relief measures, release all migrant detainees and coordinate the return of migrants.

It also recommends that the countries of origin ensure the migrants’ safe passage upon their return, provide healthcare and quarantine processes that are available, prevent discrimination against returnees and support the loss of income to a proper extent.

“Governments must not use the ongoing Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to normalize intrusive surveillance and restrictions on people’s liberty once the present crisis ends. Emergency powers, where used, must be time-limited, proportionate, subject to public scrutiny and not be used for authoritarian ends,” says the statement.

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P.S.

• Prachatai. Submitted on Tue, 7 Apr 2020 - 12:15 PM:
<https://prachatai.com/english/node/8447>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 52846), [Pandemics: Statement on the Impact of Covid-19 on Migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion — Focus on Thailand](#).