

Burma

Myanmar Junta Stops Issuing Passports

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Myanmar's military regime has suspended issuing passports since last week, dismayingly many job seekers planning to work overseas away from the social and economic turmoil in Myanmar. Labor rights activists say that the junta's move is politically motivated.

The regime suspended issuing passports in December, although Myanmar migrant workers were still able to obtain them under the Memorandum of Understanding between the Myanmar government and relevant foreign governments. But as of January 17, the junta fully suspended issuing and renewing passports, as well as accepting new passport applications.

The reasons behind the suspension and how long it will last have not been specified by the regime.

Labor rights activists say that the move is politically motivated, as the junta seeks to cut the funds flowing from Myanmar workers overseas to the armed resistance known as People's Defense Forces. The passport suspension amounts to a human rights violation, said labor activists.

Daw Thuzar Maung, a labor rights activist, said that the majority of Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia make donations to the resistance movement.

"They [the junta] apparently think that people can't work if they can't get passports, or that they can't continue to work once their passports expire. And if they aren't receiving salaries, they won't be able to fund the revolution. They have done this with that thought in mind," she said.

Many Myanmar migrant workers in Malaysia choose to overstay their visas, as they don't want to engage with the junta-controlled embassy. Instead, they apply for work and residency permits issued locally, added Daw Thuzar Maung.

"There are many Myanmar migrant workers who don't hold passports anymore. When they seek help from us, we help them contact the relevant United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office," she said.

By suspending passport services, the junta also wants to stop anti-regime activists from leaving the country while pretending to be migrant workers, observers say.

Young and middle-aged people have been leaving Myanmar daily in the hope of better economic prospects, after being deprived of their livelihoods and security amid the turmoil caused by the Myanmar military's coup of February 2021. The putsch prompted an exodus of foreign firms from Myanmar, which has only worsened the country's economy.

Top destinations for people leaving Myanmar include Thailand, Malaysia, Korea and Japan. Thailand has the largest population of Myanmar migrant workers, with another 400,000 moving there since the coup, according to labor rights activists.

U Moe Joe, a longtime Myanmar migrant rights activist and chairperson of the Mae Sot, Thailand-based Joint Action Committee for Burma Affairs, said of the suspension of passport services: "It is a blatant violation of the citizenship and human rights of Myanmar citizens."

Employment agencies and labor rights activists warned that the suspension of passport services will result in an increase in the number of people leaving Myanmar illegally.

Over 60,000 Myanmar nationals were arrested in Thailand in 2022 for entering the country illegally, according to the Thai authorities.

In a December 2022 report, the International Organization for Migration said that "it estimates that approximately 40,000 Myanmar nationals are leaving the country monthly for conflict-related but also economic and other reasons, through a range of regular and irregular pathways, with the majority migrating to Thailand."

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