

Statement Regarding the Deaths of Migrant Workers in Thailand by Bill Salter, ILO Sub-regional Director for East Asia

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ILO Sub-regional Office for East Asia, Bangkok: It is with great sadness that, yet again, we observe that foreign migrant workers in search of a more prosperous future have become victims in Thailand – and in this case they have paid with their lives.

The dead include more than 50 migrants from Myanmar, including many women and young people. The International Labour Office is following the developments in this investigation and is making its own enquiries into the circumstances surrounding the tragedy, and the treatment of the survivors, through trade unions and other organizations most involved in protecting the rights of migrant workers.

While some may characterize this as a tragic accident, or even criminal negligence on the part of the driver of the vehicle in which the people died, it is clear that this occurrence is an indication – indeed a consequence – of a much larger problem.

The Royal Thai Government is aware that Thai companies and employers need foreign migrants to help fill vacancies in a variety of workplaces – especially in the seafood industry, construction, agriculture and domestic work.

The Government is actively engaging the ILO and others to reduce the vulnerabilities of migrant workers and to deal with problems when they arise. Still, much more needs to be done.

Despite the Government's attempts to formalize a system of cross-border employment agreements with its neighbours, the demand by Thai employers for migrant workers – documented or undocumented – is continuing and may even be accelerating. However, the formal systems of recruitment are not working. The reasons vary – a slow and expensive migrant registration system, a breakdown in the sending countries' abilities to provide the initial documentation required and legitimate concerns of migrants who are worried that they will not be able to change employers, even if they suffer abuse. Within such an environment, trafficking for labour exploitation is bound to flourish.

The ILO's own research into trafficking-related labour exploitation shows that many migrants, both documented and undocumented, are indeed suffering abuses. One report has found that more than half of the Thai employers interviewed were of the view that locking up their migrant employees so they 'couldn't escape' was appropriate. Another 75% of migrant workers on fishing boats had no access to their legal documents in any event – they were held by their employers. There are continuing indications of both forced labour and child labour involving migrants in Thailand.

While Thailand cannot be held accountable for the reasons desperate young men, women and even children leave Myanmar and other neighbouring countries to search for work in Thailand, the Royal Thai Government is obliged to prevent the exploitation of those migrants inside Thailand, regardless of the documentation they may or may not have.

That means holding employers and recruiters accountable for the treatment of migrants – legally registered to work or otherwise – and punishing those employers, recruiters and sub-contractors who abuse both the system and the migrants. It means improved labour inspection of workplaces with the dignity and rights of the migrant worker paramount.



It also means re-evaluating and addressing labour migration policies head on. There is clearly a pressing need to develop a far-reaching, forward looking labour migration policy that will benefit not just the economy but people too – especially workers from other countries who, at the end of the day, are doing their fair share of helping the country grow.

The ILO is already working with the Royal Thai Government to help respond to the abuses of migrant workers and to help develop a better system of labour migration management, prevent trafficking and related exploitation of migrant workers within Thailand. As always, we stand ready and willing to extend any further technical support, as may be required, to help bring to an end the exploitation of all workers – regardless of national origin.

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