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Labour
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Fresh Research Reveals Serious Human Rights Violations of Young Foreign Migrant Workers in Thailand

Year-long Study Finds Exploitation, Coercion and Intimidation in Homes, Farms, Factories and Fishing Boats

13 December 2006

For Immediate Release:

Bangkok – More than half of foreign migrant domestic workers recently surveyed in Thailand, and one-in-five migrant teens on fishing boats, were either prohibited from ever leaving their workplace or forced to work – virtual slaves to the whims of their Thai employers, a new study revealed today.

This in-depth report – believed the first of its kind in Thailand – has uncovered significant human rights violations of young migrant workers ranging from physical assault, forced labour, a denial of freedom of movement, children in hazardous work – definable as worst forms of child labour – and routine psychological and verbal abuse. In some cases the labour exploitation is tantamount to that found in situations of human trafficking.

Often out of the sight of both the authorities and most members of the Thai public, 82% of migrant domestic workers and 45% of young migrants toiling on fishing boats said they were required to work more than 12 hours per day, often seven days per week, according to the study..

The research conducted by the **Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University** was published today with the support of the **International Labour Organization's Mekong Sub-regional Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women**. It underlines “an urgent need for effective labour inspection” particularly in work sectors where children under the age of 18 are concerned.

The study, released today as a two-volume set titled “**The Mekong Challenge – Underpaid, Overworked and Overlooked: The realities of young migrant workers in Thailand,**” found that only one-in-five migrant workers in the fishing boat/fish processing sector had ever encountered an official from the labour department. Most knew little if anything about their rights under Thailand's Labour Protection Act – a law which in any event does not extend protection to those working on fishing boats or in domestic service.

The majority of workers was paid below the legal minimum wage – and while this fact may not come as a surprise – it is nonetheless a clear violation of Thai law. Many Thai employers also preferred to hire children and younger migrants as they were deemed more obedient and easier to control.

One of the most troubling aspects of the report is the attitude toward migrants by Thai employers as it relates to freedom of movement. More than half of all the employers interviewed agreed with a statement that they should ‘lock migrants in at night so they don't escape.’ Indeed, eight percent of migrant domestic workers confirmed their employers had locked them in before.

More than one-thousand people participated in this year-long survey, including 320 domestic migrant workers¹ and 376 migrants in three other employment sectors: agriculture, fishing/fish processing and small-scale manufacturing. In all four sectors 75% of the sample were female. A further 316 employers across all four sectors were surveyed. In-depth interviews were also conducted with all groups and ten ‘recruiters’ were also interviewed.

¹ The Migrant Domestic Workers survey was conducted prior to the research in the other three employment sectors and used a different methodology.

Most of Thailand's migrant workforce comes from Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia and Lao PDR.

Young Burmese migrants were commonly found working in small manufacturing operations and in fish processing plants in Samut Sakhon while girls and young women from Burma were also commonly found working in the homes of Thais as domestic workers (the IPSR study focused on Burmese in Chiang Mai and Tak Provinces). In the latter category, 60% were forbidden from leaving the house and/or receiving visitors making their isolation and reliance on the employer virtually complete.

While many of the migrants interviewed were working in Thailand legally (their employers had registered them with the Thai authorities as migrant workers) others were working in the country without authorization (undocumented). While this undocumented nature made them more vulnerable to abuses like employer threats and coercion, it was also discovered that many registered migrants also faced significant abuses – particularly restrictions placed on their movements by employers.

While workers in the agriculture sector reported the least problems overall, three-quarters of those working on fishing boats had their identity/working documents withheld by their employers.

The research also contradicts a commonly held belief that 'recruiters' or job brokers/agents are often traffickers. Indeed fewer than 10% of all migrants interviewed claimed to have found a job via recruiters. The exploitation of migrants, when it occurred, seemed to be primarily at the hands of employers. While the role of recruiters was not part of the survey involving most domestic workers, findings in the other three sectors show that when recruiters were used they could in fact play a positive role in terms of maintaining an ongoing relationship with the migrants. The recruiters were able to make more commission by offering other services such as arranging remittances and communication to family members back home. Some recruiters also negotiated better pay or working conditions for migrants they had recruited, or were able to remove them from workplaces where there was abuse.

The report makes a total of 29 recommendations suggesting both separate and coordinated action by a number of actors to rectify the present situation.

Those actors include the Royal Thai Government, the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Ministry of Education, Ministries of Justice and Interior, the Royal Thai Police, the International Labour Organization, workers' and employers' organizations both in Thailand and internationally, as well as a number of other groups including civil society.

The call to action covers areas of improved labour protection, an end to the withholding of workers' legal documents by their employers, improved law enforcement to end abuses by employers, greater collaboration between Government and NGOs working with migrant groups, a complaints mechanism for migrants who feel they have been cheated or abused, greater access to education, the encouragement of streamlined, inexpensive, safer migration channels to deter employers from abusing undocumented migrants and to encourage migrants to enter Thailand 'legally' and safely. It also calls for a recognition of agriculture, domestic work and work on fishing boats as 'employment' within the definitions set out by the Labour Protection Act.

The Mekong Challenge – Underpaid, Overworked and Overlooked: The realities of young migrant workers in Thailand is published in both Thai and English, and in two volumes. Volume 1 is a summary of the research findings, complete with all the recommendations, while Volume 2 contains a closer examination of the results from the research conducted within each of the four employment sectors.

These bi-lingual publications are also available free of charge online in Web PDF at childtrafficking.net

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