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Migration Situation in Thailand*
Supat Gukun

Transnational migration in Thailand is an old and well-known phenomenon. Drawing back to the past, the Chinese traders and laborers were the largest groups coming to stay on Thai soil in the 18th and 19th centuries. Other nationals such as Indians, Westerners, Japanese and people from neighboring countries also came to Thailand for various reasons. The Indians merchants came to trade and to spread Buddhist teachings. The Western came to trade and to teach Christianity. The neighboring countries like the Khmer, Laos, Vietnamese, and other small ethnic groups immigrated to Thailand because of trade, fighting, escaping from either natural disasters or those caused by humans, and the sharing of some religious traditions and culture. In the event of Thai people, the country was rich of natural resources and was not densely populated. Thai people were not great travelers and there were no pressures driving people to leave the country.

The explanation of Thai migrant workers in this paper will be divided into two parts, the domestic migration and migration overseas.

Domestic Migration: Rural to Urban
Thailand is the country of agricultural base. Most of Thai people are working in an agricultural sector and live in rural areas. It is estimated that 80 per cent of Thai workers in the labor market obtain their studies in the primary level and

* Paper presented in “Media & Labor Migration” on August 21-23, 2000 in Manila, Philippines
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2 See more information in Asia Pacific Migration Research Network (APMRN) Migration Issues in the Asia Pacific, Issues Paper from Thailand
therefore become unskilled workers. The migration of villagers to urban areas in terms of seasonal movements or other forms of short-term movement is quite common because of more job opportunities provided in the urban areas. Actually, farmers are working in the rice paddies about 6 – 8 months a year. After the harvest season, they will be free from work for a certain period. Most of them will migrate to the urban areas to seek for temporary jobs, mostly as unskilled workers in a construction site. This migration cycle repeats regularly. Owing to the drop of agricultural products and market prices, some of them develop from being temporary migrant workers to be permanent ones in order to escape debts. However, the rural-to-urban migration is particularly beneficial as a means of alleviating poverty in rural areas. Many migrant workers come from villages in Northeast Thailand, where job opportunities are limited.

During the period of economic growth in 1988, the real economic growth was a miracle 13.2 % in 1988, 12.2% in 1989 and 10% in 1990 with averages annual GDP increases of almost 10% per annum during 1988-95 and average of 6% per annum in the proceeding eight year period. The economic growth significantly relied on a concentrated, low-end value labor-intensive exported oriented industrialization strategy. However, the growth was accompanied by the unsatisfactory of income and wealth. The top 20% of the population enjoyed increasing its share of income significantly from 49.8% in 1962 to 55.6% in 1986 while the lowest 20% of the population simultaneously considered the decline of its share from 8% to 4.6% over the same period.\(^3\) The growing inequity and labor migration amidst the world’s highest economic grow rates could be viewed as the lack of adequate government support and intervention for agriculture, rural development, agro-industrialisation and the country’s skewed and concentrated industrialization strategy. New employment opportunities had been almost confined to Bangkok and its suburbs with fewer opportunities for the young.

\(^3\) Ibid
in agriculture which itself had been less able to sustain because of its relative neglect and exploitation.

In 1996, Thailand encountered the economic crisis experience. The crisis began with the depreciation of the baht as the Government could not continue to hold up the national currency with its foreign reserves. What ensured had been instability of the baht, bankruptcy of financial institution, which affected the business and industries including the construction and real estate sector, the manufacturing factor, the service sector and the agricultural sector. Migrant workers have been among the first to lose their jobs in the crisis, thereby making them one of the most vulnerable populations in the country. Many are now forced to return home to their village in hope of finding work there. In fact, Thailand farmers have been praised for their self-sufficiency and independence from government intervention, but many relied on their relatives in the cities to send them back money to help with the agricultural production process.

**Migration Overseas**

Migration is an outcome of economic and political change. Economic growth creates disparities in wealth among countries and among areas within countries. These disparities stimulate movement from places of limited opportunities to those areas with higher levels of opportunity. Since the 1970s, Thailand has experienced for the first time the migration of its nationals to foreign countries. The massive flows started later in the 1980s to the Middle East and then shifted to the Asia-Pacific in the 1990s.

Most of Thai migrant workers come from the Northern and the Northeastern parts of the country. From the labor survey in

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4 Thapabutr Jamasevi and Supat Gukun, Plan of Action to Respond to the Labor and Employment Impact of Crisis in ASEAN, p.1
5 Philip Guest, Migration in the ESCAP region, (non-printed material)
6 Supang Chantavanich, The Flows of Thai Migrant Workers to Foreign Destinations with Special Emphasis to Asian Countries, p. 1
1996 among 98 samples who worked in foreign countries, it was found that most of migrant workers were male aged between 25-39 years old and obtained primary education level only. They were married with some children. The reason of migration was to earn higher wages. They had to pay recruiting companies for a lot of expenses. Most of these migrant workers had to borrow money for their travelling expenses. The money earned from work usually was not enough to cover the debts. This was supported by the study of Thai workers in Brunei, which showed that the majority of them were male (94.1%) with the average age of 33.46 years old, having low standard of education and immigrated to Brunei because of the failure or pressure in economic status of the family.

This survey was coherent with the survey of illegal Thai workers in Korea. Most of the Thai samples wanted to earn a lot of money and then returned to their homeland to set up their own business in Thailand. They mostly had only four years of education, which comparatively lower level of education than other workers.

From 1999 statistics (January-October) provided by a Labor Immigration Office Department of Employment, there were 168,055 Thai migrant workers working overseas. When classified by region (table 1), it showed that most of the migrant workers worked in the Asian Region with the amount of 148,668 (or 88.46% of total Thai workers working overseas). Taiwan was the number one for Thai labor market with the amount of 96,291 (or 64.77% of total Thai workers working in Asia), followed with 20,209 persons (13.59% of Thai workers working in Asia) in Singapore and 13,675 persons (09.20% of total Thai workers working overseas in Asia) in Malaysia. The second region was Middle East with 15,532 persons (or 09.24% of total Thai

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7 Somchai Ratanakomuttra, Intercountry Migration of Thailand (non-printed material)
8 Supat Gukun, Thai workers in Brunei,
9 Su Dol Kang, Thai Migrant Workers in Korea, (non-printed material)
workers working overseas) and 9,743 persons were working in Israel. The third region was Europe, America and other regions with 3,855 persons (or 02.30% of total Thai workers working overseas)\(^{10}\)

Table two shows that the first three major receiving countries of Thai migrant workers in the year 2000 (January-June) are Taiwan (54,814) Malaysia (16,430) and Singapore (13,570) Most of migrant workers are employed in the unskilled and semi-skilled work. Normally the types of their work are in the field of textile for industry, construction, agricultural workers, production, metal processors, machine operators, electrical technician and mechanic. Housekeeping, cooks and entertainers are quite popular for Thai migrant workers in Hong Kong and in Japan.

Most of overseas Thai workers want to return home after earning a sum of money. This expectation differs from workers from some countries who do not retain any bond to their home. Thai workers send their money home. Remittances are so high that in some instances they can level the trade deficit between Thailand and all its trading partners.\(^{11}\) However, it should notice that the living conditions of overseas Thai workers in many countries are rather harsh and they lack welfare as well as protection, especially those who are illegal workers.

During the initial period when Thai migrant labor outflows were increasing, the government did not do much to prevent migrant workers from being exploited by employment syndicates. However, it was noted that the government didn't not have a clear policy to export Thai workers unless they could earn more incomes than working in Thailand, have sufficient welfare to support a good quality of life and be able

\(^{10}\) Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Annual Report 1999, page 24

\(^{11}\) Supang Chantavanich, Preliminary Conclusions and Recommendations from the Research Project on Thai Migrant Workers in Southeast and East Asia.
to improve their labor skills. A migrant worker usually paid US$3,000 - $US10,000 to a syndicate and there was no guarantee of being employed. Unemployed migrant workers, therefore, needed assistance and support from Thai Embassies to return to Thailand. At present, the government has set up 13 Offices of Labor Affairs in 11 countries, for example in Hong Kong, Singapore, Brunei, Japan, to protect and care for the advantages of Thai migrant workers.

Because of the crisis, the government (the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare) has adjusted the overseas employment direction by encouraging skilled workers, rather than unskilled workers to work abroad. The ministry also helps seeking for labor market in Europe and North America regions, which have more stable economy than other regions.

In summary, economic and social circumstances in Thailand act as push factors for Thai workers to migrate overseas, despite domestic labor demand and job vacancies in Thailand.

**Migration to Thailand**

Thailand is not only a sending country but also a receiving one. Alien workers migrate to Thailand as a result of more work opportunities and higher wages compared to their homelands. Apart from tourists, the number of aliens coming to Thailand for long stays were low, not exceeding 5,000 persons per year during 1979–1984. Most of these alien workers were professional transients who came to work according to the Investment Promotion Act of 1977. Most of them were from Japan, China and the US. However, since 1985, the number of contract workers in Thailand increased from 6,229 persons in 1985 to 9,577 persons in 1990 and 22,101 in 1993. The increase was due to the growing number of illegal alien migrations working in Thailand.\(^\text{12}\)

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare estimates that there are approximately 74,242 legal migrant workers in

\(^{12}\text{Asia Pacific Migration}\)
Thailand in 2000. Of this number, as mentioned previously, the biggest group came from Myanmar, followed by China and South Asian Countries. The smallest group was from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Illegal alien workers are the biggest group of migrants to Thailand. The recent economic prosperity in the country has brought about income disparities between Thai nationals and its neighboring countries with slower speed of economic development. Most of the illegal alien workers migrate from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, China and Bangladesh. While a significant amount of Thai workers left for overseas employment because they prefer not to do the dangerous, difficult and dirty jobs while illegal alien workers accept the jobs that Thai nationals did not want, especially in fisheries, construction work and farming. Some illegal alien workers hold a tourist visa but later on they become overstays or work illegally. In other words, the inland shortage of labor in some sectors mentioned above and the lack of effective alien worker management brings about the existence of illegal alien workers in the country.

Since 1995, the government has implemented a policy to control foreign workers by demanding local employers to register foreign workers. Those who are illegal workers would be deported. However, the Chambers of Commerce in some border provinces in Thailand submitted a petition to the government to give amnesty to illegal Myanmese workers in their provinces. They referred to the shortages in the Thai labor force and the acute need to employ migrant workers in their businesses. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare implemented a trial amnesty in Ranong province during 1995. The proposed process of amnesty was that employers had to deposit 5,000 baht (US$200) with the provincial labor and social welfare officer in order to employ a migrant worker. Employers had to guarantee the stay of the worker; otherwise, the deposit would be forfeited.
The implementation was not initially successful because migrant workers were afraid of being arrested and did not come for registration. Employers complained that the deposit was too high and that they ran a high risk of losing their deposits due to the high mobility of migrant workers. As a result, both employers and migrant workers worked together directly and illegally instead of going through the newly introduced amnesty system. With such illegal and direct employment, employers did not need to pay the deposit and workers did not need to risk registration and possible arrest. The workers continued to work in hiding and the problem was not resolved. (*Siam Post*, February 1995)

The government therefore viewed that the resolution of labor shortage, illegal workers and the permission of migrant workers must be in line of promoting foreign investment which in turn created job opportunities for the citizens.

Recently, the Thai government (by the Department of Employment) initiated strategies to control migrant workers in the country. The strategies were as follows:

1. **Illegal migrant worker management**
   The strategy consisted of encouraging employers to hire local workers, eliminating illegal migrant workers, declaring the economic zone in 13 provinces to be border provinces, and encouraging private sectors to participate in migrant worker management.

2. **Replacement of migrant workers with local workers**
   The examples were improvement of criteria for work permit issues, giving tax reduction as the incentive for employers who hired local workers, coordination with other concerned agencies in replacing
foreign workers with local workers. As a result, local workers replaced 26,354 foreign workers in 1999\textsuperscript{13}.

3. Resolution of labor shortage in the fishery

Improvement of law and regulations to facilitate the recruitment of migrant workers in the business, which encountered labor shortage, was the vital measure accompanied with recruiting local workers to work in the fishery business or importing foreign workers in case of failing to recruit local workers\textsuperscript{14}.

Owing to the lack of Thai workers willingness and able to work in some hazardous jobs, the government has been relaxed rules to permit employers to employ illegal migrant workers temporarily prior to deportation. These were particularly from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia who could remain for not more than 1 year (no later than August 31, 2000) in 37 provinces. These are 18 different types of hazardous jobs in which these exemptions are permitted as follows: ocean and coastal fishing and related products, rubber plantations, cradle, grind fish factory, general work for construction, crop and coffee farming, sugar cane farming, fruit and vegetable farming, etc. As of October 31, 1999, the illegal alien workers in these industries have to showed up to report themselves to the officials of Provincial Employment Offices which they were required to have physical examination before issue the work permit for each of them.

In addition, according to the cabinet resolution on August 3, 1999 and November 2, 1999, the government had formulated a policy of controlling migrant workers as follows\textsuperscript{15}:

\textsuperscript{13} see table 2
\textsuperscript{14} Department of Employment, The Control of foreign workers in Thailand, 1997
\textsuperscript{15} Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Annual Report 1999, page 53
1. To deport, arrest and obstruct illegal migrant workers with all diligence while accusing of both employers and employees including other people concerned of any crimes committed

2. To promote employment opportunities for Thai migrant workers to be employed

3. To establish the effective control systems for those illegal alien workers who still remain in hazardous jobs

4. To formulate program for reducing employment of illegal migrant workers as well as to adjust the industrial workers from labor intensive to high skill composition

5. To take a good action on campaigning the information of the severe impacts on economic, social and security of the country in regarding the employment of illegal migrant workers as well as encouraging Thai people to realize the importance of the various measures for countering the problems.

In conclusion, the government policy is more favorable on limiting or replacing migrant workers, particularly the illegal migrant ones, with local workers. However, due to the low wages and nature of some kind of jobs, the local workers are not attracted to get the jobs. Therefore, the employers have not many choices unless they employ migrant workers to keep their business going on.

The Role of Media

Media, nowadays, has a lot of powers and they have influence on people's way of life. It's broadly said that 80 percent of television and radio programs are entertainment, such as dramas, music and variety shows. Many a people, particularly remote villagers, are fond of watching these kinds of program and they sometimes learn from them and apply in daily life. Things they learn may be parts of the truths and not
pertinent to the real situations which can lead them to make inappropriate decision. Hence, the concerned organizations, both the government and private sectors, may have to take into account the contents; how to educate people with the real pictures and prevent them from being the victims of media consumption.

The media in Thailand, so far, has played an important role of supporting the government to mitigate problems of migration. For example, they help the government to educate people, particularly overseas job seekers, from being deceived by deceptive agencies. Apart from this, the media also pointed out some problems related with employment of foreign workers, particularly the illegal migrant ones, such as crime and some diseases which have previously been eliminated from the country.

In other words, media will be very important as long as they act as the key unit of society to reflex needs and problems of people, point out social problems and resolutions at the same time to educate people in various ways. We would like to see media to be "neutral" and be a hope of society.

Country paper for
Regional consultation on media & labor migration
21 – 23 August 2000, Manila, Philippines
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