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Paper No. 9
MIGRANT LABOR: WHO PAYS?

BY:
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BANGKOK POST NEWSPAPER
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Migrant Labour: risk and opportunity and media discourse

Supara Janchitfah

This paper is intended only as a background paper for discussion. It is neither an academic paper nor an official report that can be cited, without permission, for any media report. The content of this paper is derived from my own experience in covering different social and environmental issues as well as my observation of the role of media in Thailand, which are my main beats. I focus my concern on Burmese workers who constitute the majority of migrant workers in Thailand at the moment.

Most of the Burmese workers have entered illegally at different points along the border of Thailand. The main reason that drive them to work in a foreign land is economic, and for some ethnic groups, is to escape from civil wars that continue to plague their country. The success rate for these migrant workers are purely the matter of individual luck. Many of them have thus become pawns in the illegal business of human trafficking. In some very few cases, they may be lucky, being sent to good employers. Most, however, have been assigned to sweatshops and end up with works shunned by most Thais. Quite a few have become commercial sex workers. Worse, after a long day of intensive works, many migrant workers have been duped by their own employers, and instead of receiving some meagre payment, were reported to the authority for deportation.

In all, the migrant workers have to live in constant fear. There is no way for them to improve their skills or see a better world. The Thai government in 1996 allowed labourers from neighbouring countries to fill up the need of some business sectors such as fisheries and some factory works which were shunned by Thai.

Two years later, the Thai authority announced a ban on all migrant workers, with the only exception in certain border provinces. But in 1999, the exemption clause was also revoked, meaning between 800,000 to one million workers estimated to be working in Thailand are cast as illegal. The new policy, designed in the height of economic crises, was aimed to combat the rising unemployment among local Thai citizens. However, it ignores the fact that the very jobs held by these migrants are not taken up by the Thais right from the start.
Moreover, the new ban could be considered an attempt to prevent the adverse consequences of giving nationality to the children of migrant workers who may be born in the soil of Thailand.

Those who work in sex business are likely to work at cheap "tea houses" or low graded brothels. These commercial sex workers run a high risk of HIV infection. Some of those infected were later reported dead. In some very grim cases, the HIV patients were reportedly burnt by the brothel owners, even their ashes were not sent home. Nor were their relatives, friends were informed of what happened to them.

Most of them want to earn some living, some left home hoping that they will get a decent job and be able to collect some money to send home. But things do not always turn out that way. Some of them ended up being arrested, and all their possessions confiscated before facing deportation.

On the other hand, in developed countries, illegal migrant workers may be arrested, and yet the Court still returns them their previous savings. In Thailand some unlucky workers may get arrested because their own employers tipped the police in a bid to avoid paying their own employees. Fortunately, the situations have since improved slightly, as a new legislation also imposes a high penalty term on anyone found to hire or provide asylum to the migrants. (see attachment #1 Migrant Labour: Who pays)

Thai media and Human rights violations

To begin with, migrant workers are not the only group to have their rights violated by the Thai media. Pictures of women raped to death have been portrayed time and again in several vernacular newspapers. Many Thais have thus become de-sensitised to the issue. For many of us in media circle, however, such portrayal is a real shame.

One reason the pictures of illegal migrants may appear on the front page of some newspapers is to publicise successful operations of Immigration officials. But this kind of pictures which shows how the arrested migrants are tied by ropes reflects far more than what appears on the surface. The pictures reflect an insidious process in which these Burmese workers have become dehumanised and turned into 'the other'. "They were treated as pigs or dogs that must be tied before sending them to the slaughterhouse," said
one human right academic. Unfortunately, mainstream media continues to use these pictures on a daily basis without awareness they are violating the principle of human rights. (See pictures)

Moreover, many local Thai newspapers have a tendency to jump into conclusions and pass a verdict, often without checking the facts. When the cases involve foreign immigrants, the matter could have damaging effects. A few weeks ago a monk was found dead in his monastery near Bangkok. The police interrogated everyone at the temple. During their investigation, they found two illegal Burmese working on a construction project for the temple.

Immediately the next day's headlines went: "Arrested two Burmese who brutally killed the monk". The details of those reports said the police officers found these two Burmese acted suspiciously, with some kinds of stains on their clothes. They suspected the stains may be the monk's blood, so the clothes were sent for a DNA check. Unfortunately, the dailies invariably dropped their coverage of the incident right at that point. There is no follow-up story, so we don't know whether the two Burmese were in fact found guilty or not. But to go by the first day's reports, they have already been condemned as the monk's killers.

There are many similar incidents that reflect how newspapers tend to side with the police's preliminary opinions without seeking more information themselves. Why are illegal Burmese always accused of doing bad thing? Attitude of some journalists reflect their beliefs. Most of them said the presence of these illegal immigrants is dangerous to Thai society. They are behind the Thais' unemployment, that they have been enjoying a free ride from the back of Thai taxpayers for all kinds of social and medical welfare programmes. They have brought with them some diseases that have disappeared from Thailand long time ago. Journalists are also worried that Thailand may end up having to give nationality to these illegal immigrants.

It is not only journalists that adopt the idea, most general Thai as well. They do hate Burmese workers. I interviewed some house maids who used to work with some Burmese during the period that the government allowed Burmese to work. Thai workers said they are afraid of get infected as they work with some Burmese. They were so afraid of these workers.

How do people and journalists adopt these ideas?
At the moment, the government use the media to disseminate their ideas. Ministry of Labour for instance has produced some media campaigns to point out that these illegal workers are dangerous. (See photocopy of the calendar) There were some billboards and cut-outs around Bangkok to point out that Thai should not employ these illegal workers. There were some campaigns on Television. It is probably not easy to explain why the Thai government has adopted such idea and practices. It is quite obvious that the government is being criticised of their inability to solve economic crisis problems as well as the problem of unemployment. The easiest way to slow down the pressure is to find some scapegoats.

Media discourse

In her paper, The competing discourse on Hilltribes: media Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Thailand, Dr Krissadawan Hongladarom of Chulalongkorn University pointed out that “Recently, issues which cause direct effect on urbanites, viz. murder and illegal labour have captured the media's attention. These latter issues depict Karen as well as Burmese as robbers and murderers. These two groups of people migrated to big cities and work as maids and factory workers. Several newspapers pay attention to this type of news. *Matichon*, for example, had covered the incident in which a Karen killed this newspaper's executive editor's mother consecutively for several weeks from August 1998. This may be because of the nature of these murder issues in which general consumers are interested, and because of the feeling that these people are to be blamed for. A journalist remarks: "They committed a crime on Thai soils without feeling grateful to Thailand for letting them stay here". Also, according to a news report in *Thai Rath* on 29 January 1991, Karen are "ungrateful mountain bandits"."

Stereotypes

Thai history sets a record that Burmese is our Thai nation-state enemy, they are those who invaded Thailand and conquered Thailand twice. This kind of stereotypes found from many Thai. According to many of my interviews in different issues, most Thai would feel that these Burmese are our enemy, they burnt our capitals. To treat them badly is a chance for them to pay their sin. “It's good that police can arrest these Burmese, this is the chance to revenge,” said a Thai in Kanchanaburi province.
Illegal immigrant are often represented as the *other* who are different from Thais, full-fledged citizens of the nation-state in terms of race, language, customs, and culture. These illegal immigrant are often regarded as agents of deforestation (some refugees who stay in Thai border refugee camps), narcotic trafficking, and other criminal activities. Because they are 'the other' that is why many officials and media can treat them as if they were not human beings or member of this world without border: globalisation.

Solutions:

Presently, Thai government has no clear policy on the issue. The government cannot resist the pressure from some business sectors that need to employ migrant workers. These business sectors usually complain about shortage of manpower. It is hard for the Thai government to serve the needs of these business sectors, in the same time to protect national security, this is not to mention human rights protect.

Some Human rights advocates suggested that to improve such situation is to give human rights education to media. Academics suggested that media should examine and criticise each other role.

Media should be more critical. We should also pose more serious questions to the policy makers. We should have far and wide vision in dealing with the issues. Depth studies on related issues are needed among the media. Officials are the good sources of information but to parrot them is not a constructive way in reporting and protecting public interests.
MIGRANT LABOUR: WHO PAYS?

While migrant workers from Burma help fill jobs shunned by Thais, their work on fishing boats and as domestic servants is encouraging hitches. Supara Janchitfah explores the dilemma facing Burmese workers in Ranong.

RANONG is officially the least populous province in Thailand, but it is unofficially among those most crowded with Burmese immigrants.

As a major entry point of Burmese migrant workers, Ranong has seen them fill jobs in trawling, mining, construction, mangrove forest restoration, household services, retailing, food shops and, sadly, brothels.

According to the National Security Council's statistics, the majority of immigrants to Thailand are from Burma. In all, 99,995 Burmese entered Thailand after March 19, 1976 and registered with the Interior Ministry. In Ranong alone, there were 18,308. This does not include 150,000 illegal immigrants.

In the South's coastal provinces reliant on fishing, Burmese illegal immigrants appear to be more welcome than Thais because they accept much lower pay and are willing to take jobs Thais increasingly shy away from.

According to Ranong Fisheries Association chairman Sompong Pochanakul, there is high demand for workers in the fishing industry because Thai Northeasterners are no longer interested in risky jobs.

Mr Sompong said Burmese earned less than their Thai counterparts, but he declined to be specific about the wages earned by the Burmese.

A local businessman, who asked not to be named, told Sunday Perspective that the labour shortage in Ranong prompted many employers to hire Burmese. Fishing has continued largely because of these willing workers.

"Employers prefer to hire the Burmese," he said. "Their wages are lower and they are generally more docile. Even in trouble, these Burmese do not dare to complain to the Thai authorities for fear of arrest and deportation."

Burmese workers are now allowed to work in 10 coastal provinces under the ministry's regulations on Burmese labour. However, they must be employed in fishing only and must obtain work permits before their employment. Those who cannot produce a permit will be charged with illegal entry.

Muang Ranong Police Chief Pol Col Paitoon Patthanasophon said police had to take action against Burmese illegal workers even though this might upset some employers.

"It's quite an irony. Business people are accusing us of destroying the local economy by arresting their Burmese employees. But we have to arrest migrant workers who illegally entered Thailand and we want to prevent a greater influx of these illegal migrants."

There are more jobs that could be filled by the Burmese other than fishing.

One Ranong woman said she hired two Burmese women to work as housemaids.

"It's difficult to look for a housemaid because Thai women now prefer factory work. And yet the law does not allow us to hire Burmese."

Not everyone welcomes the Burmese.

"Some Burmese are tricky and cause a lot of problems to us. My friend's parents were killed by their Burmese employees and they stole some money, too," said a local Thai.

Another said: "They use our facilities and government budget. When they get sick some of them have to go to public hospital. Sometimes they spread some diseases and contaminate Thais."

In front of a sleazy hotel in Ranong, two young Burmese girls approached a Sunday Perspective driver. They said a few Thai words. Immediately we understood what they were trying to propose.

Instead, they took us to a group of rented houses which looked like a little Burmese community.

Sharing a small room with a couple and two unmarried girls, Win and Yin...
had to be satisfied with its simpleness with no furniture.

An Indian-looking girl, Win came from Rangoon. She said she knew what she would do in Thailand. She seemed unaware of her plight. Yin was a bit more shy. Her story may be the same as those who want to earn their living properly but end up in a brothel.

Some neighbours came and listened to our conversation. Win Win was another girl in the community with whom we talked. She came from Pega, a southern province of Burma. She has been in the province for five years and arrived through a Burmese job broker.

"I wanted to earn a living and decided to come to Thailand. The broker told me there were many job vacancies and I could get good pay. The broker took me to a place and left. The owner of the place told me that I was sold for 5,000 baht. I didn't know what to do, I could not see the police as I was an illegal immigrant and certainly I can't communicate with them," Win Win said.

Young and lacking education, Win Win had to become a prostitute. She earns 35 baht out of 100 baht paid by each customer. It took her some time to pay back the 5,000 baht she did not owe in the first place.

"I could not save money because, from time to time, I had to go to prison as police asked the brothel owner to send five girls to jail in rotation. I had to go and resume paying my debt when the owner got me from jail. The owner had to pay 2,000-3,000 baht. Sometimes, when there was a conflict between the brothel owner and police, all 55 of us were arrested," Win Win said.

"Sometimes, police would take some of our friends out of jail. When my friends came back they told us they were raped by four policemen. Sometimes, the police like to take those who have not been in the commercial sex trade. A young girl I know, who was selling things in the market, was taken at night and came back with tears telling us she was raped by five policemen," Win Win said, recalling events in the last five years.

One young Burmese man who was arrested recently told us he saw police take two girls from a cell at night. One had been in the sex trade but the other was a 16-year-old Mon who was about to get on the bus to go to Maha Chai to work on a construction site.

"I saw her come back in tears. As our cells are connected, I heard from those women in jail that the girl was raped by police."

Similar stories are frequent. Burmese women are subject to sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on their security. Their physical and mental integrity are not generally recognised. As asylum-seekers or clandestine refugees, they are vulnerable to being picked on by local authorities.

A Sunday Perspective reporter recently went to a police station in Ranong where illegal immigrants are detained before they are sent to court before deportation to Burma.

"Some detainees have died in jail," said a policeman at Muang Ranong Police Station.

A doctor performs an autopsy before the body is cremated. If the deceased has no relatives, the local non-profit Foundation will handle the cremation, according to the policeman.

Because the old police cell was too crowded, a new detention centre for male illegal immigrants was built at the station. The room can accommodate around 1,000 people. About 200 detainees were there at the time.

Most of the detainees do not want to go back to Burma. Some of them were deported to Victoria Point and, after undergoing punishment in their country, came back to Thailand to work on trawlers. Some worked on rubber plantations.

"I don't want to go back home. Life is hard there. I have nothing to eat and no means of living. In Burma they are building a railway line linking the coastal towns. Hundreds of thousands of us were conscripted to build the railway and had to work hard. It is better to stay in Thailand," a detainee said.
When the police near, details of abuse could not be discussed. Permission to see the women's detention area was at first refused, with police saying there were no women detainees.

"We have sent them all back," said Pol Lt Tassanai Nittayawimon.

He was told some women had been seen in the morning (the police at that time asked us to seek permission from the police chief).

After protracted negotiations, the policeman allowed entry to the jail on condition no photos were in the detention area.

The place smelt awful. The jails for men and women are adjacent. Poor sanitation is a risk for mothers and young children.

Two mothers and two children were present along with a pregnant woman who was unresponsive. Another four girls were said to be prostitutes. They said they had been detained for three days and their master would take them out soon. They showed red marks on their hands.

The toilet and washing area is in the same room. When a woman wanted a bath, she would use a long skirt to close of the area from men's gaze.

A young girl said she had been in Thailand for a year as a construction worker. "I can earn good pay and my boss will take me out soon."

She said she knew nothing about abuse of the Mon 16-year-old girl. However, there was a communications problem and police stood nearby.

All the women complained about the jail. Two meals for an adult were all right but for young children food might be a problem.

Muang Ranong police chief Pol Col Paitoon said: "We try to improve our jail. The detainees previously didn't have a place to sleep. Now men have been moved to a new area which is clean."

He dismissed claims women detainees were raped by police. "It might have happened at another police station," he said.

As for the right of illegal immigrants to file a lawsuit if they were abused, Pol Col Paitoon said: "They can do that if there is such a problem but the story that you have heard may be from other police stations. I am sure I will punish those who abuse them. It is against police regulations."

Sappasit Khumprapat of the Child Rights Protection Centre said young people who were abused by the police could file a lawsuit but in most cases they did not have enough courage to complain.

Prof Dr Pradit Chareonthaitawee, president of Mahidol University, said Thailand should have clear measures to tackle the immigrant question as it would have a long-term impact on Thailand.

"If businesses need more cheap labour, they should not ignore human rights," he said.
Thai workers leaving for Taiwan, go with huge intentions to improve their financial status, but instead end up losing their hard earned money. SUPARA JANCHITFAH looks into reasons why this transpires.

MANY factors contribute to a change in attitude of Thai workers going overseas. High intentions of earning good money, sending it back home and going back to live with their family are sometimes adversely affected by new surroundings and culture.

An illegal Thai woman: Anong (not her real name) is an illegal worker in Taiwan, who headed here in search of gold but found sand. In Thailand, she used to work as a clerk at a district office in Ubon Ratchathani. Later she married a state school teacher in a village where she resided. They struggled financially when their first child was born. Resigning from her job at the district office, she fully depended on her husband's meagre salary to make ends meet.

Both husband and wife did their best to find ways to generate more income. Things seemed to look brighter when they learnt from neighbors that working in Taiwan would mean good money.

"At first, my husband wanted to be the one to go, but I argued because he already had a steady job which meant security for our child's future. So I volunteered to come," said Anong.

In 1993 she went to a job-placement agency in Ubon and found that all she had to do was to provide 65,000 baht commission fee. Her sewing skills landed her a job. Soon after she went through stipulated requirements put down by the job-placement agency and the Department of Employment.

In the contract she signed, it mentioned clearly that she would be placed as a sewer with a salary of 14,010 NT dollars, given three meals free of charge and paid overtime accordingly.

"I was first sent to a textile factory to spin cotton, which wasn't originally what I was supposed to do. There was no way I could say anything but to accept it. I worked very hard but received only 8,000 NT dollars, no overtime and worked even on official holidays," she said.

"My employers have failed to honour the contract. I don't know who I could ask help from. I worry about my debt back home, therefore when I learned that there was a better paying job for me I decided to run away."

Anong's second job was at a small clothing factory, the owner of whom she later married.

"He is a kind man, who always pities Thai people and assists them financially. At first, he didn't know that I was married but later I told him. Although he knew that I am married and have a child he doesn't detest me. He offered to legally marry me, so that I could receive citizenship, but I refused. I want to go home and live with my husband and son," she said.

Anong doesn't want to rely on her Taiwanese husband's income. Aside from helping her husband with his business, she finds time to sell Thai sausages and sweets to Thai workers in Taipei.

"I will definitely go home this coming April. I want to collect some more money and go home."

Anong said her husband in Thailand doesn't know of her present circumstances and she would rather keep it a secret. "I know he wouldn't accept what I 've done but there wasn't a better way out to pay back my debts."

Reason why they misbehave: Many Thai workers are reported to have run away from their employers for many reasons. They know why they can't be loyal to their employers.

Malai, a native of Chiyaphum Province, ran away from the factory she worked in after her foreign employers raped her. She ran away and was later sent back to Thailand. She could not file a compliant because of the
language barrier and an unfamiliar law.

A case of Thai workers under stress: "I plan to run away from the current factory because they heavily deducted our salaries. It is not enough for me to repay my debt back home," said Phong.

Phong of Korat works in a factory in Taichung, in the centre of the country.

Working illegally gets immediate results, such as no taxes, fleeing deposits or social funds. If employers honour their verbal contract and the police aren’t notified of their existence, these type of workers have a chance to collect enough money to pay off their debts.

Furthermore, they can work for over the two years stipulated under Taiwanese law. But it is likely they will be caught and everything is then over for them.

Taiwan hasn’t been Phong’s first trip overseas, as he worked as a construction worker in Kuwait in 1992. For this trip he gave 60,000 baht for service charge to a job broker in Korat. Unfortunately, the Gulf War broke out five months after he arrived in Kuwait. He came home with mounting debt and tried to work very hard for the next two years to repay this debt. He used his registered land to borrow money from local money lenders and a commercial bank.

He went through all kinds of hard work to gather enough money, which included growing rice and cassavas. Going through all these hardships wasn’t enough to pay back the debt. So he spent 78,000 baht and went to Taiwan.

"My elder sister sold her gold necklace, while my mother used registered land to borrow money from local money lenders which charged 60% a year to 5% a month interest. I also borrowed money from my younger sister who works in Bangkok. We sold all we could to pay the job-placement agency."

He wasn’t able to pass the skill test required for the position of carpenter. "They said the way I sawed wood wasn’t straight."

He went through many other skills tests which eventually he passed. But what was oblivious to him at that time was that these tests weren’t relevant to the work he would be doing. Phong said he could not understand why the government couldn’t directly provide overseas jobs for rural people.

Some scenarios: Thai restaurants aren’t only a place to eat. They are a meeting place where Thais can talk to each other, share each other’s plight and buy Thai goods. Most shops help illegal workers send money back home.

In some restaurants, they provide Thai books, magazines and sauces. At a Thai restaurant in Taipei, many Thais were seen enjoying their night out. One of them openly said that this was the only outlet they had to forget their hardships.

Drinking is a way to reduce tension for many workers. But gambling isn’t allowed. "This is our biggest worry," said Mrs Prasansri, a job-broker in Taiwan because workers love to gamble. This habit usually hampers them from having any type of saving and leads to many other problems.

Apart from this many of these workers have caused a lot of confusion. A worker once asked me to send his money to his home town in Chiang Rai, and the following month to Nong Khai. I learned later that he had a wife in one province and a minor in the other," said Prasansri.

Overseas migration has caused culture shock, home sickness and stress. Many have no access to information, books to read, favourite radio programmes, or temples to go to. This leads to misconduct which eventually causes them enormous long term problems.

We were cheated

A GROUP of 65 Thai women workers were called to queue up inside Taiwan's National Palace Museum. It was easy to recognise that this group was Thai.

People from a land of freedom and smiles were now under the supervision of three Taiwanese conducting this trip. The faces of these Thai workers may have been smiling but their hearts certainly weren’t.

One of them curiously asked me, "Miss... are you Thai?". We started our
conversation, with them opening up. I discovered that most of them were from Northeastern provinces, while some came from Pichit and Sa Kaew.

Most of them I realised were well armed with education, a number had finished diplomas. When they sat for required skill tests and exams at the job-placement agency, they were told that they would be sent to work in a computer company.

"Some of my friends failed the exam and could not go. At that time, I considered myself lucky. But now I think it were the people left behind who were most fortunate," said a girl from Pichit province.

"I'm now working at a plastic industry where the work I do hardly requires any skill. The ventilation in the factory doesn't work most of the time and it becomes quite unbearable. It is terrible that some of our friends have to spray colour all day," she added.

"In our factory, people in different sections aren't allowed to speak with each other. They try to control us. When my relative who works in another company came to see me, my employers didn't allow her inside. So we had to shout to each other over the fence," another girl lamented.

Moreover, they said they had borrowed money from local money lenders, paying them as high as 5 to 10% interest monthly. This money is a commission they have to pay job brokers.

Many didn't know there was a Thai Labour Office in Taiwan.

"My job broker said the Thai consulate responsible for Taiwan is in Hong Kong. I have lost all hope in complaining," said another.

While they were talking, their Taiwanese supervisors tried to interrupt and ask them to leave the museum.

"I can't talk much with you because my supervisor knows some Thai. He has the authority to send me home. You have to help us out because we are in great trouble. We were cheated in coming here," said the girl leaving the museum with anxious eyes.
Authorities say going overseas in search of better jobs has become a new tradition for people in the provinces. But the under-privileged say it is a chance to make ends meet. SUPARA JANCHITFAH reports.

"GOING in blind to seek greener pastures," is a slogan closely associated with Thai labourers going abroad. They readily acknowledge lurking dangers that might have to be faced.

But to them this risk is thought to be worthwhile compared with their present situation.

International migration is not a new phenomenon in Thailand. Thai labourers have worked in the Middle East since the early 1970s when such countries needed massive construction labour. In the later 1980s, labourers flew to Singapore.

Taiwan's economic success has led to surplus need of overseas workers, doing jobs shunned by the Taiwanese. The early 1990s saw Thai labour heading towards Taiwan, a new destination.

Lessons learned by many Thai workers have been bitter. Some have prospered. Some of the less unfortunate are cheated by unscrupulous job-brokers, who charge high commission rates and have no jobs waiting for them on arrival.

Overall situation in Taiwan: Currently there are about 120,000 Thai workers in Taiwan according to the Thai Trade and Economic Office (TTEO) in Taipei. Since 1991, the Taiwanese government has officially accepted more than 100,000 positions of Thai labour yearly. But recruitment has fallen into the hands of private job-brokers and job placement agencies.

Taiwanese employers need foreign labour as many local Taiwanese easily turn down certain jobs. That is why there is an intensified need for foreign labour, said Mrs Prasansri, a Taiwanese job-broker.

However Thai workers still have to pay high rates on commission services. The Ministry of Labour after all has stipulated a new rate since 1994 at 56,000 baht per head, which is higher than the previous rate of 38,000 baht. But since then Thai labourers still have to pay higher than the stipulated rates. Hundreds of Thai workers interviewed by Sunday Perspective in Taiwan paid higher than 56,000 baht.

Regarding the high rate of commission paid by Thai labourers, Mr Chaturon Atthawiparkpaisan, acting director-general of the Employment Department said, "A one-sided hand can't make noise."

"After knowing well enough what awaits them, I can't comprehend why they leave. It has become a new tradition for rural people to work abroad. They try to imitate each other, so now it's become a custom," said Mr Chaturon.

A Thai worker on the other hand says differently: "If I were rich I wouldn't be going overseas. I am the head of the family. If I stay home nothing will become better. We, farmers, have been working hard for generations but what has that resulted in," said Dej from Chaiyaphum.

They've placed hope in the government to help them. But what is to be expected from any ruling body. Failure of the government to handle problems in the agricultural sector has been a factor contributing to the issue. Seasonal migration to work in the city helps them survive, but not prosper.

"Are we wrong in hoping for better living conditions?" asked Prawit from Korat.

Government programmes providing jobs during the summer only benefit selected people. "This is only a temporary solution for the summer. The wages received doing these jobs are minimal. We need regular jobs with equally regular incomes," said another Thai.

Dej and his 35 friends are now working at a construction company in Lou-Chu county, Taipei. They are under great pressure for different reasons. One of the most grave causes is the debt they incur from job-placement agencies. A commission fee paid by Thai labourers is between 75,000 and
Problems: Working overseas has both negative and positive aspects. On a positive note, they're admired by their neighbours up-country but on a negative note they are thought of as deserters.

"I want to jump from the expressway to commit suicide when I realise that working here is actually increasing my debts, plus high interest rates which my family will have to pay," said Niwat, a Thai worker.

"Don't quote my name in the newspaper, because then my family will know that I am in trouble. I always write that I am happy here."

Niwat endeavours to work overtime on Sundays but has managed to get only 9,000 NT dollars a month (1 US dollar equals 26.75 New Taiwan (NT) dollars). There are many like Niwat who want to end their problems by committing suicide.

A worker from Tak province had to be sent home after he tried to hang himself twice. "If he was not sent home he would have died," said a sullen Dej. This man attempted suicide because he was fearful of not being able to repay his debt, said his friend.

Stress plays a major role in these circumstances. Worry over being unfairly paid by their employers is a vital cause of tension among a majority of Thai workers.

"We were supposed to receive 14,750 NT dollars, but all we have is less than 9,000 NT dollars. Last month the company failed to pay us. You know how much pressure that puts on us? Interest on the loan we took at home is concurrently increasing. My family is also suffering by constant worry about these debts and my well being. I borrowed over 80,000 baht to work abroad," said Dej.

Being victimised into going through many stipulated procedures by the Ministry of Labour and job-brokers, has left Dej a disgruntled man.

Another major cause of anxiety is that we don't always get to work on jobs that were promised to us. This has often led to strain in the employer-employee relationship.

Skill test: Singkhom from Phayao province said he used to work as a foreman in Singapore. Being a carpenter by profession he passed all required skill tests to work in Taiwan as a foreman but was put to work as a construction worker. "What is the reason for taking a skill test if I have to work as a construction worker?" he said.

Their sorrows have never been heard by their employers, as fear of being sent back home hampers them from complaining. "If we complain they might find fault in us and use it as a reason to send us home," said Niwat.

As a foreign labourer in Taiwan, 20% income tax must be paid if one works less than 183 days. But if a labourer works over 183 days a year, only 6% income tax is deducted. Usually, taxes, social funds, and a fleeing fee deposit is deducted from Thai workers' income. The fleeing fee is deducted to prevent labourers from breaching contracts.

Working environment and contract: Despite knowing that they will not be protected by law, many Thai workers choose to "run away" from their contract.

Wichai from Udon Thani province is such a case. "I learnt that 36 Thai workers were escaping from a factory of 200 Thai workers," said Wichai who worked at PVC plastic factory in Tai-nun county, north of Taiwan.

"We tried to contact the Thai Labour Officers in Taipei, but weren't able to for no reason. I wonder if Thai officials were involved with our employers," said a sceptical Wichai.

Wichai was told he would be working in a furniture factory, but instead was sent to the PVC plastic company. According to him the working environment was horrendous.

His work involved colouring and chemical spraying. He complained of losing much weight due to stress put on by poor working and living conditions. "There was hardly any ventilation in the rooms given to us because of over crowding," he complained.

But job-brokers viewed these workers in a very different perspective.
"Workers are always complaining about who will hire them to idle-around and live comfortably. They have to work. If not, nobody will pay them," said a job-placement agency in Thailand.

People breaching such contracts have complicated problems being faced by Thai workers overseas.

"There is now a new type of occupation, which is called 'abduction'. People in this business solicit workers to run away from their employers. Currently, many Thais have earned the reputation of being dishonest and tricky. Recruiting these people is not an easy job," said the manager of Thai Syntax Travel Service Manpower Company, a job-broker in Thailand.

Reason for high service charge: Many job brokers have similar attitudes towards Thai labourers. General understanding is that these people are not well educated. For them to have a 100,000-baht saving after working for two years is good enough by their standards.

"Many of these workers have only studied up till Por (grade) 4 or Por (grade) 6, they can't earn this much while working in Thailand. They couldn't dream in their entire life to have 100,000 baht. We are in fact helping the country as well as them," said the same manager.

Communication hurdles: The communication barrier seems to be another hurdle faced by Thai workers abroad. Many of them can not communicate with their employers in Chinese. Misplaced by job agents, in addition to having no skills in specific tasks, they receive lower incomes than what is promised.

"I don't understand what happened to the overtime money I was supposed to receive. There is no system of pay slips at the construction site I work. In Singapore, it was better than this. There was more dialogue from the employers through a translator," said a Thai worker previously working in Singapore.

According to the Thai Labour Office in Taiwan, in 1994 it received 1,056 complaints from Thai workers while handling 946 issues.

Even though there are many Thai workers in Taiwan, this office is equipped with only eight officials.

Mr Dusit Wongnawa, Thai Labour Counsellor in Taiwan, said he has been facing a number of problems and barriers concerning this issue of which a shortage of staff, especially local staff, is most serious.

The issue of extending staff contracts in such a case is subject to ratification by the Revenue Department each fiscal year. The uncertainty of this extension discourages local Taiwanese from applying.

Updated reports show that two Taiwanese have been recruited on a temporary basis.

Selected staff should be made permanent to attract more Mandarin-speaking candidates, as this is a dialect used when negotiating with local employers.

In Taiwan, there are a large number of job agencies, most of which provide 'special services' to small factories. The agencies act on behalf of factories in overseeing all procedures concerning recruitment of new employees which further include acquiring permission to import labourers, insurance, air tickets, airport pick-ups and health examinations.

Hurdles though are definite when these agencies are entertained by job brokers. Dusit felt it would be hard to compete under government regulations.

He said there should be sufficient budget for government agencies to cover expenses involved in recruiting and to compete with private firms. Another pitfall mentioned was the lack of cooperation received from factory officials. Such obstacles make it difficult to find out the exact fee job placement agencies charge applicants. In most cases, factory and job placement agency staff share benefits from deals made between them.

Thai workers from different factories suggested the Thai Labour Office in Taiwan should receive calls at lunch time as it makes it difficult for them to phone during office hours.

Singkhom from Phayao said he wishes to see the Thai government enforce tight laws on job-placement agencies which take advantage of Thai labourers.