

world

THAILAND'S UNCOUNTED DEAD

Jobless, persecuted and far from home, migrant workers struggle to rebuild shattered lives

by Patricia Elliott

THAILAND—Silence is the most unusual sound you can hear in Bangkok. As a line of white cars sweeps toward the Grand Palace, vendors stop their cries and tuk-tuk drivers cut their hammering engines. The teeming, thunderous streets grow still.

Beyond the palace gates, preparations are underway for the ritual cleansing of the body of the King's 21-year-old autistic grandson, Khun Poom Jensen—taken on an otherwise calm, brilliant morning by a wave that made no distinction among victims.

For onlookers, his funeral cortege offers a clear reminder that the tsunami has touched all in the Kingdom.

By morning, quiet sorrow is replaced by determined activity, as everyone from school children to royalty sets themselves to the task of sending aid to Thailand's six stricken southern provinces.

Donation boxes appear in rural markets. At Bangkok's Red Cross Centre, greeters meet you at the door and usher you to a waiting room. With all the correct forms in hand, you take a number and join a surprisingly fast-moving line. When the crowds grow too great, a massive blood collection tent appears on the concourse of the glitzy Zen Central shopping centre.

It is astounding to see such order arise from the surface chaos of Thailand. Four days after the disaster I follow a convoy down the south highway. There are no blaring horns, no overtaking vehicles. Each truck is numbered and travelling in precise order.

Under the tarps are all the necessities you can imagine and some you never thought of: one truck carries a load of toilet paper, another is full of plastic sandals.

Indeed, of all the countries hit by the wave, Thailand, with its network of decent roads, hospitals and communications infrastructure, is perhaps best equipped to deal with disaster.

This has become a source of national pride—and a source of unexpected political currency for tycoon/prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is in the midst of an election campaign to preserve his right-wing, pro-nationalist government.

Already Thaksin has announced that Thailand will not accept outside cash donations. Thais can take care of Thais, he says. And, viewing the line of trucks heading like a well-

aimed arrow to the south, this seems to be true.

But there are victims who may never see these trucks and the goods they carry.

Like many Asian countries, Thailand is home to a large population of migrant workers, including well over one million who have paid off brokers and dodged border guards to escape poverty and repression in neighbouring Burma (called Myanmar by the military junta).

About 128,000 Burmese labourers were living in Thailand's tsunami-affected region, although just 24,000 were properly registered with the Department of Labour—a difficult and bureaucratic process that leaves plenty of room for humiliation and abuse.

They are an invisible army supporting the construction, fishing, rubber and tourism industries. Many lived near the sea in flimsy shelters.

Reached by cell phone, Ko Aung Myo Min, a Burmese exile, describes the situation.

"There are 600 Burmese hiding in the mountains above Khao Lak," he says. "We keep finding them in other places, too. They are afraid to come down for help. Right now, their biggest concern is security."

Their fears are not unfounded. When Burmese survivors gathered at the district office in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, 1,000 were summarily arrested and deported back to Burma—as if losing their loved ones, possessions and jobs were not enough trauma for one day.

Another 500 are stuck in detention in Ranong; Burma will not allow their return.

Thaksin's government tends to blame migrants for whichever economic and social problems beset Thailand. The tsunami's power has made an ongoing anti-migrant campaign easier.

"They've lost everything, including their ID cards, work permits and employers," explains Ko Aung, making them more vulnerable than ever to arrest.

Thaksin says the deportations follow reports of looting, although the Law Society of Thailand states that 20 of the 27 reported looting cases involved Thai nationals.

With some support from Oxfam and just 15 volunteers—a number that includes traumatized survivors themselves—Ko Aung is conducting efforts to reach the workers with food and medicine.

"There are people scattered everywhere. They don't want to come down for the mountain for help, because they are treated so poorly."

"They are so traumatized. We're helping them perform religious ceremonies to cope with the grief."

As for numbers of dead, they may never be counted. Some survivors who went to search among the corpses laid out at Yanyao Temple were reportedly arrested.

Unlike Europeans, relatives inside Burma have no way to come to the disaster scene, or even to communicate with Thai authorities. Ko Aung is trying to set up a list of deaths on the web, although few in Burma have internet access.

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"We have eye-witness accounts of 163 deaths," is all he can say for now.

After that, it's guesswork. The majority of Burmese tourism industry workers are dead he believes, with higher survival rates among fishers. According to local press reports, half of 2,000 Burmese workers in one district alone are missing.

No doubt, many lie unclaimed at Yanyao Temple.

In a global age, there are millions of migrant workers throughout Asia, living without basic rights, travel documentation or access to social services. They are vulnerable enough even before disaster strikes.

As countries undertake renewed disaster planning, the special conditions faced by migrant workers must become part of the picture. National governments have little stake in aiding these workers and indeed may gain political points for further harassing them in times of social stress.

Ironically, critics point out that Thailand will need the workers back when reconstruction begins. Who else will carry the load?

The Thai people themselves and their NGOs have little use for Thaksin's nationalist pronouncements. They simply want to help people. The support and intervention of the international community, including Canadian NGOs and labour unions, is sorely needed for the tsunami's uncounted victims.

Donations to Burmese tsunami victims in Thailand: Canadian Friends of Burma, 145 Spruce St. #206, Ottawa, ON K1R 6P1.



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