

ALTSEAN BURMA

ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA
campaigns, advocacy & capacity-building for human rights & democracy

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TSUNAMI IMPACT ON BURMA - Update 28 January 2005

Note: This briefing note is an update of a previous Altsean-Burma paper entitled "Tsunami Impact on Burma – Update as of 4 January 2005". It covers tsunami-related developments affecting the Burmese population inside Burma and in Thailand from 4 to 28 January 2005.

- While Burma itself was fortunately spared the scale of death and destruction caused by the tsunami in neighbouring countries, its citizens, particularly Burmese migrant workers in Thailand was severely affected. Between 2,500 and 3,000 Burmese migrants were killed by the tsunami waves, and 4,000- 7,000 are still missing.
- The Burmese authorities have failed to fulfil their obligations towards Burmese citizens abroad. The junta has not sought to help send home the bodies of Burmese tsunami victims in Thailand, nor has its embassy offered any support to the survivors.
- Although the Thai government stated that all tsunami survivors were entitled to relief aid, there have been reports of discrimination against Burmese migrant workers. Thai authorities also deported some 2,000 Burmese migrants, framed as scapegoats for the lootings occurring in the tsunami-affected areas.
- Some of the Burmese migrant survivors who wanted to stay on and look for their missing friends and relatives were forcibly deported. Others who wanted to go back to Burma have been forced to remain because their employers need cheap labour.
- After widespread domestic and international concern, the central Thai authorities have become more cooperative with NGOs working for migrant workers rights, however, implementation at the local level is slow.
- In Burma the official tsunami death toll is 60-80. This assessment, with which the UN concurs, ignores the impact of the 26 December earthquake and ongoing tremors in Shan State, which have killed at least 13 people. The tremors are linked to the earthquake off Aceh in Indonesia, which led to the tsunami. Other organizations continue to report higher numbers of casualties.
- Between 10,000 and 15,000 people in Burma needed emergency help, with 5,000 to 7,000 having lost their homes and property.
- The Burmese regime's paltry response to Burmese affected by the tsunami exposes the serious lack of priority that the authorities have for the welfare of the people of Burma, as well as the disturbing lack of preparedness to deal with natural disasters.

RANGOON REMAINS INDIFFERENT TO THE PLIGHT OF ITS PEOPLE

It is now clear that Burmese people most affected by the 26 December Asian tsunami were migrant workers in neighbouring Thailand. Between 2,500 and 3,000 Burmese migrants were killed by the tsunami waves, and 4,000-7,000 are still missing, according to the latest assessments by field workers in the region.¹

The Burmese regime's lack of concern for the plight of citizens affected by the tsunami in Thailand has aggravated the effects of the Thai authorities' discrimination at the local level. The military regime still has not sought to claim the bodies of Burmese tsunami victims, nor offered any support to those who survived.²

This callousness and severe negligence is a stark contrast to the pro-active efforts of governments and embassies of other foreigners who were affected by the tsunami in Thailand. Worse still, Burmese authorities reportedly fined some 40 Burmese tsunami survivors at the Three Pagodas Pass who attempted to return to their country after the disaster.³ At some stage, the military even closed its border checkpoint at Kawthaung, to prevent an inflow of Burmese migrant workers returning home.⁴

BURMESE MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND: TWICE VICTIMS OF THE DISASTER

Wild accusations made in the Thai language media fanned anti-Burmese sentiment, which led to the deportation of 675 Burmese, according to official sources.⁵ However field workers and the Asian Human Rights Commission report that over 2,000 Burmese were expelled from Thailand.⁶ While both Thai and Burmese nationals have been arrested for looting, the Burmese were the perfect scapegoats.⁷

Thousands of Burmese migrants remain in hiding for fear of being arrested if they approach the authorities for identification, or simply to obtain food rations. Around 3,000 migrants are still hiding at abandoned construction sites at Kamala beach in Phuket, and another 600 in the forest and plantations of Phang Nga province.⁸ While many local people and employers have been supportive of the survivors, the resulting trust and goodwill has been undermined by cases of Burmese survivors being robbed or subjected to rape attempts.⁹

Survivors also suffered great anguish for not being able to claim the bodies of loved ones. The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) reported that some migrants who found the bodies of relatives and friends at Patong Beach, were chased away by locals and relief teams before they could retrieve them. When they returned to the beach, the bodies had disappeared, and have not been found since.¹⁰

Civil society organizations, the media and diplomats have severely criticized the Thai authorities for its treatment of Burmese migrants affected by the tsunami.¹¹ The Asian Human Rights Commission said, "The Burmese migrant workers are totally isolated and have received no assistance." The Commission condemned the forced deportation of Burmese migrants – both legally registered and unregistered – on the pretext of fighting crime.¹² "We're extremely concerned by reports that their lack of legal status is making it difficult or impossible for them to get the disaster relief they desperately need," said the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).¹³

In response, the central Thai government has become more cooperative with NGOs working for migrant workers rights, however, implementation at the local level is slow. There has been a distinct time lag between commitments made in Bangkok being observed on the ground in the affected areas.¹⁴

XENOPHOBIC NEWS REPORT FUELS DEPORTATIONS

Sensationalist and xenophobic news reports have fueled mistrust of Burmese migrants among the local population and Thai authorities. On 8 January the Thai newspaper Khao Sot published an unsubstantiated report, later recycled by two television stations, claiming that over 1,000 Burmese were looting damaged and abandoned properties in Khao Lak, Phang Nga Province.¹⁵

The Thai police admitted it began rounding up migrants after discovering some damaged hotels had been looted, yet as journalists and NGOs have pointed out, the number of Burmese committing crimes is insignificant compared to Thai nationals.¹⁶ Suropong Kongchantuk of the Law Society of Thailand confirmed that only 7 of the 27 suspected thieves arrested so far were of Burmese origin.¹⁷

Authorities had rounded up Burmese migrants indiscriminately, and made no effort to determine each person's legal status. In one incident, a young mother and her toddler son were deported 2 days after she was hospitalized for a miscarriage caused by the tsunami.¹⁸ In many cases, Thai employers, some of whom died in the tsunami, held the papers of many migrants. Others simply lost their papers when their homes were destroyed, leaving them vulnerable to deportation.¹⁹ Immigration police commissioner Pol Lt-Gen Ammarin Niamsakul admitted: "It is hard to tell who is legal or illegal as these people have lost their belongings in the traumatic incident or their work permits were taken to the grave with their employers".²⁰

OFFICIAL RESPONSES

The Thai authorities' management of tsunami relief operations has highlighted a disturbing gap between top-level official statements and on-the-ground realities. The Ministry of Labor officially expressed concern regarding Burmese migrant workers, stating that all of them should have received post-tsunami relief aid, regardless of their legal status.²¹

The Thai Minister for Natural Resources and Environment Suwit Khunkitti said he was unaware that Burmese migrants were denied aid in relief centers, and confirmed that everyone was entitled to aid.²² Minister of Interior Bhokin Bhalakula defended his government, saying there was no double standard in the treatment of tsunami victims.²³

According to the Thai government, migrant workers who lost their work permits in the disaster should be able to obtain a new one. Those who lost their jobs should also be entitled to new employment.²⁴ So far local authorities have clearly failed to implement this policy, and insufficient effort was made to inform migrant workers about their rights.²⁵ In Phang Nga Province's Takua Pa District only two of more than 7,000 Burmese migrants got their ID cards and work permits reissued.²⁶ Chairman of the Thai Senate Foreign Relations Committee Kraisak Choonhavan criticized the government, saying it should not consider all Burmese migrants as criminals. The Senator confirmed that some local officials had prevented Burmese from receiving disaster aid.²⁷

Meanwhile a 26 January meeting between the International Organization for Migration and Phuket Governor Udomsak Asavarangkul illustrated the ongoing ignorance and denial of the plight of Burmese migrants by Thai authorities at the local level. The Phuket Governor claimed that only two Burmese migrants were killed by the tsunami, and the families had already claimed their bodies [On 5 January HREIB has already estimated the number of Burmese migrant deaths in Phuket alone to be around 300, with 2,000 still missing and 3,000

in hiding].²⁸ While the Governor said Phuket province helped all victims equally, he was ignorant of the issue of compensation for affected migrants, saying he didn't have any guidelines on the issue.²⁹

CHEAP LABOUR STILL NEEDED

While Thai authorities are busy arresting and deporting Burmese migrants, Thai employers are still in desperate need of cheap labor to restart the local economy. In an incident of farcical yet tragic proportions, six World Vision officials were beaten and locked up in a cage by locals of Phang Nga's Tap Lamu fishing village on 12 January because Thai employers were afraid the NGO workers were coming to take away their Burmese labor.³⁰ The village businesses had paid 3,000 baht earlier in the year for the Burmese migrants' work permits, and feared they wouldn't be compensated if the migrants were sent away. These migrants are a source of cheap labor for the fishing industry.³¹ Thai Senator Kraisaak Choonhaven confirmed that in many cases the Thai employers did not want to let their migrant workers go back to Burma.³² This reluctance to allow their workers compassionate leave stems from the fact that the affected migrant workers are not eligible for re-entry permits to allow them to return to Thailand.

RELIEF EFFORT FOR BURMESE MIGRANTS

Burmese communities abroad and local NGOs, as well as UN agencies, have allocated funds specifically for affected migrant workers, however these efforts are impeded by the atmosphere of fear generated by local crackdowns.

A network of Thailand-based NGOs have formed the Tsunami Action Group (TAG) to provide immediate assistance to migrant worker survivors, and longer-term community development. Emergency support includes provision of food, health care, shelter, counselling, and legal assistance to obtain new work permit and halt deportations.

UN agencies and World Vision are also working for the voluntary repatriation of 500 migrant worker families who wish to return to Burma.³³

USCRI stated it will assist Burmese refugee victims of the tsunami in southern Thailand who are not receiving disaster relief assistance. "We are going there to assist local groups which are in the best position to help this marginalized population, and we're appealing for help in the effort," said USCRI Executive Director Lavinia Limon.³⁴

SITUATION INSIDE BURMA

HOW HARD DID THE TSUNAMI HIT BURMA?

While international observers widely suspect that the tsunami caused more devastation in Burma than initially claimed by the military regime, Rangoon-based UN agencies and international NGOs were quick to back the military regime by declaring their assessment to be "in line with the Government's own findings."³⁵

Both the UN and the junta now agree to a death toll of 60-80, and estimate the longer-term affected population at 10,000 - 15,000, of whom 5,000 -7,000 were directly affected. The UN cited the "rocky nature of the islands", and the "topography of the southern and delta coastlines", as having provided protection to the population.³⁶

These figures are significantly smaller than those previously estimated by the World Food Program. On 4 January the WFP said hundreds of fishermen may have died, and around 30,000 people were in immediate need of food, water, shelter and medicine.³⁷

Environmentalists highlighted the protective role of mangroves to explain the relatively benign impact of the tsunami waves in Burma compared to neighboring Thailand. Mangroves along Burma's coastline remain mostly intact, while in Thailand they were cleared to make way for shrimp farms and hotels.³⁸ The Salon or Moken people, the "sea-gypsies" inhabiting the Mergui Archipelago in Tenasserim Division, have also reportedly used their traditional knowledge to detect precursor signs of the tsunami. Moken communities took refuge uphill and avoided a high casualty toll, although their villages have been destroyed.³⁹

FIGURES STILL DISPUTED; DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR SHAN STATE EARTHQUAKE

NGOs and independent news agencies continue however to dispute official figures. According to the Arakan National Council (ANC), in Arakan State alone 96 were killed, 30 people were missing and 3 villages were severely damaged by the tsunami. The ANC also warned that the death toll is likely much higher as the tsunami hit during the peak of the fishing season.⁴⁰

UN figures disappointingly do not take into account the impact of the earthquakes that hit Burma on 26 December. Reports from Shan State indicate that a tremor measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale killed 13 people on 26 December in Namzang township, 100 km east of Taunggyi. Local authorities ordered the local population to keep quiet about the natural disaster.⁴¹ The tremor was strong enough to be felt in the northern Thai city of Chiangmai. Frequent, milder, tremors continue to be reported in some areas of Shan state.

So far there have been no independent assessments of the earthquake's impact in Shan State. The World Health Organization's latest Tsunami Situation Report dated 20 January states a total of 61 deaths in 3 States and Division: Arakan, Irrawaddy and Tenasserim. Curiously, the pro-Rangoon Chinese official news agency Xinhua reported that the "tidal wave" killed 64 persons and left 3,460 homeless in six States and Division, including Pegu and Southern Shan State, which do not border the Andaman Sea.⁴²

TSUNAMI IMAGES BANNED

UN support has done little to curb the SPDC's paranoia regarding news coverage of the tsunami, maintaining its ban on images of the tsunami's impact in neighboring countries and in Burma. Four video storeowners in Sittwe, Arakan State, were reportedly arrested and fined on 16 January for selling copies of video showing images of the tsunami disaster obtained with satellite TV.⁴³

The regime was quite happy, however, to report the 14 January tour of Kawthaung, Southern Burma, by its Ministers of Health and Social Welfare and UN representatives. The junta's mouthpiece reported the UN staff was happy to access first-hand the situation and confirm that the impact of the tsunami had not been severe.⁴⁴

CONCERN FOR BURMA: THANKS BUT NO THANKS

Amid dirty military campaigns in ethnic nationality areas and intensified harassment of the pro-democracy movement, deflecting international attention remains a priority for the regime. Prime Minister Lt Gen Soe Win reassured the international community at the Jakarta Donors'

Conference on 6 February that Burma was able to cope by itself, claiming overseas aid should be channelled elsewhere.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, UN agencies and international NGOs in Rangoon were busy coordinating relief operations, creating the Tsunami Assistance Coordination Group (now renamed Tsunami Liaison Group).⁴⁶ Chaired by the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the Group quickly moved to support the regime's version of the tsunami's impact in the country. Careful to avoid a rift with the regime, the IFRC said it agreed with the military: "there is not a need for an emergency appeal [in Burma] as there are other places".⁴⁷ Reports of the junta's initial lack of cooperation, and independent assessments of far more severe destruction were thus dismissed by the international organizations' eagerness to maintain an amicable relationship with the generals. The IFRC nevertheless told foreign diplomats in Rangoon 10,000 to 15,000 Burmese were in need of emergency help, with 5,000 to 7,000 having lost all their homes and properties.⁴⁸

The IFRC has received donations from the Chinese government, as well as the German and Canadian Red Cross.⁴⁹ At the request of the Tsunami Assistance Coordination Group the German Red Cross sent a plane to Burma on 7 January carrying 12,000 blankets for the victims made homeless.⁵⁰ On 12 January it was reported that the US Red Cross donated USD 500,000 to UNICEF's tsunami relief work in Burma. Iran also delivered 600 tons of tsunami aid to Burma, and the Netherlands is planning to do the same in the near future.⁵¹

UN agencies are now moving towards rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts, with the Tsunami Liaison Group launching a second round of assessment to determine mid to longer term needs.⁵² The World Health Organization (WHO) is focusing on rebuilding infrastructure, and increasing disease surveillance sensitivity. WHO mobilized resources to provide basic medical care for 50,000 over a three-month period, as well as 22,000 malaria treatment kits. The provision of safe drinking water is also a priority, since many wells were contaminated by salt water.⁵³

POSTSCRIPT

ABOUT THE TSUNAMI ACTION GROUP (TAG):

The Tsunami Action Group (TAG) was formed in January to coordinate donations and assistance to Burmese migrant workers affected by the tsunami. TAG is working in collaboration with the Action Network for Migrants (Thailand), a network of 12 organizations working for safe migration and fair working conditions for migrants in Thailand.

TAG can be reached via email at tagmigran@yahoo.com or map@mapfoundationcm.org.

While TAG does not have its own website, many relevant reports and updates are featured at www.saydanatsunami.org

Donations can be lodged directly into the TAG bank account, however please notify the TA secretariat of the details of your contribution so that it can be acknowledged.

BANK ACCOUNT DETAILS:

Account number: 471-2-19749-3 (Account is in Thai Baht)

Account holder/Name: Tsunami Action Group

Name of the Bank : Kasikorn Bank

Bank Address: Suthep Road, Chiang Mai, Thailand

SWIFT code: KASITHBK

ENDNOTES

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- 2 AFP (19 Jan 05) Myanmar workers in Thailand are the forgotten tsunami victims
- 3 Mizzima (24 Jan 05) Survivals of the Tsunami fined in Burma
- 4 Financial Times (13 Jan 05) Burma migrants fear expulsion from Thailand: Following the disaster, many are hiding in the hills
- 5 Bangkok Post (27 Jan 05) Call to ease migrant worker restrictions: Fear of arrest scares Burmese labourers
- 6 Asian Human Rights Commission (19 Jan 05) Thailand: Discriminatory relief operations and forced deportation against Burmese migrant workers affected by the tsunami
- 7 Grassroots HRE and Development Committee (Burma (21 Jan 05) A Khao Lak Diary. Available as PDF at www.saydanatsunami.org
- 8 Inter Press Service (14 Jan 05) Thai compassion for Burmese migrants wears thin
- 9 Grassroots HRE and Development Committee (Burma (21 Jan 05) A Khao Lak Diary
- 10 Inter Press Service (14 Jan 05) Thai compassion for Burmese migrants wears thin
- 11 The Nation (15 Jan 05) Burmese caught in a vicious circle
- 12 Asian Human Rights Commission (19 Jan 05) Thailand: Discriminatory relief operations and forced deportation against Burmese migrant workers affected by the tsunami
- 13 U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (7 Jan 05) USCRI to Assist Burmese Refugee Tsunami Victims in Southern Thailand
- 14 Tsunami Action Group (26 Jan 05) Field reports by phone
- 15 Irrawaddy (13 Jan 05) Prominent Thai senator slams treatment of Burmese
- 16 Irrawaddy (12 Jan 05) Criticism of Thai Media Accusations
- 17 Bangkok Post (9 Jan 05) Burmese toll could be higher
- 18 Grassroots HRE and Development Committee (Burma (21 Jan 05) A Khao Lak Diary
- 19 Financial Times (13 Jan 05) Burma migrants fear expulsion from Thailand: Following the disaster, many are hiding in the hills
- 20 Bangkok Post (9 Jan 05) Burmese toll could be higher
- 21 South China Morning Post (14 Jan 05) Relief may be out of reach for migrants: Illegal and legal workers are reluctant to come forward for fear of deportation
- 22 Inter Press Service (14 Jan 05) Thai compassion for Burmese migrants wears thin
- 23 Irrawaddy (13 Jan 05) Prominent Thai senator slams treatment of Burmese
- 24 South China Morning Post (14 Jan 05) Relief may be out of reach for migrants: Illegal and legal workers are reluctant to come forward for fear of deportation
- 25 Tsunami Action Group (13 Jan 05) Phone reports from TAG in the South of Thailand
- 26 Bangkok Post (27 Jan 05) Call to ease migrant worker restrictions: Fear of arrest scares Burmese labourers
- 27 Irrawaddy (13 Jan 05) Prominent Thai senator slams treatment of Burmese
- 28 Nation (5 Jan 05) Hundreds of Burmese dead
- 29 Thai Press Reports (26 Jan 05) UN agency investigates fate of migrant workers in tsunami-hit areas of Thailand
- 30 Irrawaddy (13 Jan 05) Prominent Thai senator slams treatment of Burmese
- 31 The Nation (13 Jan 05) Tsunami-hit Thai villagers assault health workers aiding Burmese labourers
- 32 Irrawaddy (13 Jan 05) Prominent Thai senator slams treatment of Burmese
- 33 Tsunami Action Group (13 Jan 05) Phone reports from TAG in the South of Thailand
- 34 U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (7 Jan 05) USCRI to Assist Burmese Refugee Tsunami Victims in Southern Thailand
- 35 Tsunami Assistance Coordination Group (6 Jan 05) Press Release. The Coordination Group participants are: IFRC, ICRC, MRCS, UNRC, UNDP, WFP, UNICEF, WHO, UNIC, UNHCR, MSF(CH), MSF(Holland), World Vision, CARE, SCF(UK), PSI, ZOA, ADRA.
- 36 Tsunami Assistance Coordination Group (6 Jan 05) Press Release
- 37 AFP (4 Jan 05) Hundreds of Myanmar fishermen likely killed by tsunami: UN
- 38 AFP (6 Jan 05) Tsunami calamity highlights key protective role of coral, mangroves, Richard Ingham
- 39 Irrawaddy (14 Jan 05) Sea Gypsies, Survivors of Tsunami
- 40 Narinjara (9 Jan 05) Arakan State's tsunami death toll rises to 96
- 41 SHAN (16 Jan 05) More aftershock deaths reported
- 42 Xinhua (10 Jan 05) Tourism operation in Myanmar beach resorts remain normal
- 43 DVB (18 Jan 05) Burmese authorities ban tsunami disaster news and images from Asia; Mizzima (24 Jan 05) Survivals of the Tsunami fined in Burma
- 44 New Light of Myanmar (17 Jan 05) Ministers inspect earthquake and tidal wave-hit regions in Kawthoung
- 45 AP (6 Jan 05) Myanmar prime minister says his country can cope with tsunami
- 46 Tsunami Assistance Coordination Group (6 Jan 05) Press Release
- 47 DVB (7 Jan 05) Burma junta says one thing and does another on appeal for tsunami victims
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