

Executive Summary

Foreign Migrant Workers: Facts, Problem Identification and Recommendations

Since late 1980s, Thailand has made significant progress in transforming itself from an agricultural to an industrial based economy. This rapid economic growth caused a general tightening of the labor market and labor shortages in certain segment. It is evident from relatively low levels of open unemployment and the rise in wage rates. The labor tightening is not only evident in Bangkok but also in the provinces during the peak season in agriculture. Thai workers have become more reluctant to accept manual and low paid work as more jobs open in the industrial and service sectors. Consequently, there is strong pressure for illegal labor migration makes Thailand a powerful magnet for migrants from neighboring countries.

It is recognized that cross border migration has been a well-known phenomenon in Thailand since 1980s. The number of illegal migrants has grown from about 40,000 in 1987 to about 700,000 in 1995, nearly two-thirds of them from Myanmar.

During the past two decade, the Thai government has tried to find ways to manage the large number of illegal migrants from Myanmar. The National Security Council (NSC) is one of the main national organizations under the Prime Minister's Office dealing with migration issues that have implication for national security. But recently the role of NSC has changed from war refugees to primarily economic refugees. The government has assigned the NSC to deal with ever increasing number of illegal migrants in Thailand especially those along the Thai-Myanmar border. Several measures were introduced, these included: (1) set up rules and regulations that allow the hiring of illegal workers while they are waiting to be repatriated; (2) registered the illegal workers from Myanmar and allow them to apply for work permit; (3) strictly enforcement of checkpoints along border; and increasing penalties to both illegal migrants and employers.

The implementations have become difficult for many reasons, to name just a few; (1) It is almost impossible to seal a thousands of kilometer along the border; (2) It is difficult to come up with clear policies on this because of opposing interests of businessmen; (3) It is difficult to implement at the field level since there are always conflict views, understaffed and poor working environment among local government agencies.

Recently, the government as recommended by NSC has come up with a new short term measures to control inflow of unskilled illegal migrants. Some of these measures are: (1) to allow those workers waiting to be repatriated to be bailed out by employer by depositing only 1,000 baht to the immigration office to make them available for work; (2) to increase the permission areas from 9 provinces to 39 provinces; (3) to increase the nationality from Burmese to include Laos and Kampuchea; and (4) to allow the migrant workers to work in agriculture, fisheries and related activities, mining, transportation and industries.