

Long-standing problems

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Thailand's Burmese migrant community, estimated to number two to three million, comprises a number of ethnic groups. Among these migrants are few who have passports, and many who left their native land bankrupt and broken by years of physical and economic persecution.



TAKE FIVE: Burmese migrant labourers enjoy a break outside a fish market.

Some have no identification, and some, like the Rohingya, are simply denied that they ever lived in Burma at all.

For years, Thailand has attempted to formalise a process to import workers from Burma, and to legalise those already here. Thai and Burmese officials signed a memorandum of understanding to do so in 2003, but the governments were unable to reach agreement on the process until last year, when it was settled that verification of the nationality of workers - the key to legalisation, since so few migrant workers have passports - would take place in Burmese territory.

Similar agreements with Cambodia and Laos were also agreed in 2003, and have been in effect for several years, with all activities taking place in Thai territory.

The process, as outlined in the Operational Manual for Burmese Nationality Verification published by Thailand's Department of Employment, involves 13 different steps and actions to be taken by at least six separate Thai and Burmese governmental agencies.

Basically, a worker is required to submit personal information, which is passed from the provincial Employment Office to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then to officials in Burma for verification and approval.

Once approval is received, the employer is notified that the worker (accompanied by their employer or an appointed substitute) may travel to one of the three border

centres to obtain a temporary passport, which permits them to return to Thailand to acquire a visa and obtain a work permit, which is valid for two years and renewable for a period of four years.

Theoretically, under this new system, migrants will have more freedom and protection - they will be allowed to travel around the country freely (as opposed to being restricted to a single province), apply for a motorbike licence and be granted access to the Social Security Office's workers' compensation fund.