



Beyond the Nation: Myanmar's Humanitarian Crisis in Thailand

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Introduction

Humanitarian crisis is defined as “an event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security, or well-being of a community or other large group of people usually over a wider area” (UNISDR, 2009). Among three types of humanitarian crises, conflict falls under man-made emergencies. The crises particularly affect people in low-income countries due to their financial and infrastructure precarities, resulting in a wide range of damage in socioeconomic, physical and mental health, environmental and ecological areas (Bloxham, 2022).

Background and Method

As Lee’s Push-Pull theory highlights (Faridi, April 2018), civil conflicts, infrastructures breakdown, poor economic growth and basic services accessibility lead migration to Thailand (Chen et al., 2024; IOM, 2024). Forced migration has been an issue in Myanmar for many decades due to the tension and armed conflicts between the military and ethnic groups. Thailand has been the destination country for many refugees since then, and the number of Myanmar migrants is increasing, particularly after 2021 coup d’état.

As of October 28, 2024, there are 69,900 displaced people from Myanmar to neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2024). On the other hand, the East Asia website indicates over 6 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand (Naing, September 2024). Regarding registration status, there are 3,415,744 registered migrant workers in Thailand as of March, 2024 and 586,548 stateless and undocumented persons as of December, 2023 although it is underestimated. 156,000 displaced people live in temporary shelters along the 2,400-kilometre Myanmar-Thailand border: 85,000 in nine border camps, 51,000 fleeing conflicts within Myanmar and lack of registration with UNHCR for the remaining 20,000 displaced persons (Chongkittavorn, September 2024).

Extant studies focus on Myanmar’s migrants’ health care access and migration decisions along the Thailand-Myanmar border during Covid-19 and political unrest period (Chen et al., 2024) and addressing humanitarian crisis situation with particular emphasis on Rakhine State and role of NGOs (Khairunnisa. et al., 2023). Despite the vulnerable situation of Myanmar migrants in current turbulent time, studies have overlooked their challenges in Thailand. As such, this review intends to highlight Myanmar humanitarian crisis situation secondary to forced

migration after February, 2021 with a narrative review of academic articles, reports and websites.

Results

Three themes emerge from the review which are (1) economic insecurity, (2) personal insecurity and (3) health insecurity.

1. Economic Insecurity

This session highlights the economic precarity of Myanmar migrants. Migrants have difficulty to receive registration document such as pink cards and thus, lack of job becomes one of the biggest difficulties (Adair, April 2024). Refugees pay money to the authorities to be able to work in Thailand because of their illegal status (Naing, September 2024). Furthermore, high rental fee causes double burden for migrants (Adair, April 2024). Myanmar's declining economic situation also stresses migrants to secure jobs in Thailand that further exposes exploitation and abuse. As livelihoods, most migrant workers are employed in informal jobs such as construction, domestic work, agriculture with poor working conditions and lack of labor protection with the risk of exploitation and unpaid wages. In education access, mass migration with increased number of migrant children induces strain in educational sector to meet the growing demand with limited resources. Economic insecurity also has a significant impact on health care access. Due to financial constraint, migrants cannot access the Migrant Health Insurance Scheme, and hospitals face with financial burden (IOM Thailand, 2024b). Migrants and refugees live in crowded and unsafe conditions with lack of running water and electricity in most camps (IOM Thailand, 2024b; Peter, May 2024). Besides, illegal status makes them inaccessible to various resources such as food, non-food items (blankets, bedding, hygiene kits, etc.), health and education (IOM Thailand, 2024a), and vulnerable to arrest, detention and deportation (IOM Thailand, 2024b). Therefore, it is evident that financial security plays an essential role in overall well-being of migrant population.

2. Personal Insecurity

Migrants' experience of human trafficking, labor and sexual exploitation, and violence against women are discussed under personal insecurity.

2.1. Human Trafficking, Labor and Sexual Exploitation

While financial constraint drives migration to Thailand, migrants become the victim of trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation, and forced criminality. Criminals take advantage of home country's situation and deceive with overseas job promise (IOM Thailand, 2024a). According to the National Anti-Human Trafficking committee, there were over 500 trafficked victims in 2022 which consist of 16 percent from neighboring countries' migrants and 84 percent from Thai nationals (IOM, 2024). This situation is particularly prominent in illegal

migration status and thus, registration of migrants is imperative. Lack of registration makes them not only vulnerable to abuse but also inability to report their abuse experiences (Naing, September 2024).

2.2. Violence against Women

Lack of basic needs enhances domestic violence in the camps (Peter, May 2024). Women migrant workers are at risk of other types of abuse, exploitation and sex trafficking due to lack of referral pathways and safe spaces (IOM Thailand, 2024b; Sullivan, July 2022).

Since personal security, decent work and living conditions are fundamental human rights, these should be fulfilled in migrant population. However, refugees and fleeing migrant population are in lack of basic needs. Being in vulnerable situation, they face various forms of abuse and exploitation. Specifically, women migrant workers have not only increased domestic violence from their partners and family members but also high risk of sex trafficking.

3. Health Insecurity

Health insecurity is one of the main challenges faced by migrants in Thailand. They are at risk of exposing both physical and mental health problems. Regarding physical health, they have high rate of tuberculosis, malaria and HIV as a result of precarious living conditions, sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking and lack of access to preventive healthcare services. Ongoing Myanmar crisis situation, vulnerable situation in Thailand such as exploitation and displacement, and isolation from family and friends, unemployment, discrimination and fear of deportation have significant negative effects on mental health. Therefore, mental health and psychosocial support need to be emphasized in migrant population to enhance their well-being (IOM Thailand, 2024a, IOM Thailand, 2024b, UNDP, 2023). Illegal status deters migrants from accessing health insurance (Naing, September 2024), and cultural and language barriers are the obstacles in accessing health care for those with health insurance. Undocumented status also induces deviant coping mechanisms. Lack of freedom, and restriction on education and employment outside of the camps cause limited job opportunities. As a result, they rely on drug and even commit suicide (Peter, May 2024). Furthermore, emotional tension and obstacles to healthcare access are linked with non-communicable diseases which are also prevalent in migrant population. Displacement-induced stress and trauma cause unhealthy coping methods such as poor food consumption, lack of physical activity and drug abuse, leading to non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases (IOM Thailand, 2024b).

Precarious financial situation and insecure living condition subsequently lead to health insecurity in migrant population. Similar to the above themes, illegal status prevents them to access health insurance.

Conclusion

It is obvious that various humanitarian crises are faced by Myanmar migrants in Thailand, and financial, personal and health insecurities are linked together, causing several crises and burdens in migrant population. Thus, urgent and effective support from international humanitarian organizations is imperative for the overall well-being of the migrant population during the country's turbulent time. Despite the Thailand's effort to provide various fundamental rights for Myanmar refugee population, gaps still remain such as access to education, birth registration, health care, employment, etc (Myanmar Response Network, May 2024). Therefore, comprehensive protection for refugees is still needed and it should be ensured for them. Firstly, it is time to bring vulnerable Myanmar migrants out of the shadows by providing legal status and reducing their humanitarian crises. Secondly, secure shelters and housing are important, and should be provided for their safety. Thirdly, safe recruitment, ensuring decent work and protection of migration workers are needed to deter labor exploitation. Finally, migrants should be provided health insurance information for better coverage, and health care services should be provided in culturally appropriate and migrant friendly ways. Pressing issue of human trafficking and labor exploitation should be effectively tackled with international collaboration. Additionally, migrants should be educated about their various legal, labor, healthcare and social protection rights to be able to claim for them in destination country. All in all, emphasis should be put to support the vulnerable migrant population in Thailand with humanitarian spirit for the best benefit of them.

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