

Report

Cycles of abuse: How extortion of remittances from Burmese workers perpetuates worker migration

Introduction:

Announced in 2008 the Royal Thai Government (RTG) instituted a project of 'National Verification', intending to issue temporary passports for Thailand's estimate 1.8 to 3 million migrant workers¹. While migrant workers from Laos and Cambodia were able to register at offices provided by their home country within Thailand, the vast majority of migrants, of whom nearly 1.5 to 2 million are Burmese, were forced to travel back to Burma to either return home or register at offices in Myawaddy, Tachilek and Kawthaung.

The difficulty of the return journey, made under the threat of extortion and detention by the Burmese State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) administrative and military bodies, as well as mistrust and fear of the SPDC's reaction to registering migrants, are key reasons cited why an estimated 1 million Burmese migrant workers have refused to register for the temporary passport. Subsequently, the deadline for registration, which passed initially on March 3rd, has led to the arrest or flight of what HURFOM estimates to be at least 100,000 Burmese migrant workers thus far.

In the majority of cases, Burmese migrants work in Thailand to send money home to families still in Burma. These remittances often form a significant portion of a family's income and are crucial in paying for basic daily costs. With the disruption caused by the RTG's policy of deportation, the money used to sustain the livelihoods of many families in Burma will be cut.

Whether arrested by Thai immigration authorities or choosing to return due to the threat of arrest, non-verified Burmese migrant workers now find themselves in the precarious position of being without any protection or rights in both Thailand and Burma.

This insecurity makes them primary targets of travel restrictions, extortion and theft by individual Thai police officers, Burmese government administrators and military, their ethnic proxy forces, and corrupt brokers. Migrants make relatively little by Thai standards – an average salary of 3,500 baht a month – yet money taken from migrants through extortion during their return trip quickly compounds into large sums, benefiting Burmese military and civilian forces as well as pro-government ceasefire groups.

Once returned home, many migrants have reported that there are few jobs available to them in Mon State. The few opportunities to earn income available in the consistently stagnant Burmese economy have since been filled by the increased number of returning migrant laborers. Often originally driven to seek an income abroad due to the economic system formed decades of mismanagement, migrants find that the situation has not improved, and again have little choice but to return to Thailand.

Inspired by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)'s February report, *Abuse between borders*, HURFOM has documented the extortion efforts conducted against migrants along the length of their return journey, and their experiences once they have returned home. HURFOM hopes to highlight the issues of insecurity migrants face during their journey back to Burma, the loss of crucial remittance money, and the negative impact these issues will have on migrant livelihoods, and the overarching immigration goals of the RTG.

These personal accounts drawn from Mon and Karen State are representative of other undocumented occurrences of abuse and extortion, as migrants return to Burma from Thailand. Due to the difficulty of approaching and interviewing migrants in the process of returning home, as there is a very great risk to the migrant's and field worker's security, the accounts documented here have been gathered from migrants who have since returned home, brokers who have assisted migrants in successful navigation of checkpoints on their journey, or migrants who have again returned to Thailand due to the severity of unemployment after returning to their villages.

¹ From the Tiger to the Crocodile, Human Rights Watch, February 2010.

Background:

At the time of the National Verification's initial deadline on March 3rd, nearly 1 million Burmese migrant workers remained in Thailand. These workers make up a key component of the country's labor force, performing the most basic jobs within Thailand's economic system. Yet, since January 2010 Thai authorities have been pressuring Burmese migrant workers to either register for temporary passports, or return to Burma.

Immigrating from a climate of economic stagnation, Burmese migrants enter the Thai work force not seeking excess financial gain from a more dynamic economy, but instead out of a need for basic survival. Sending crucial remittances home provides for families that often have no other financial option for their survival. According to a survey conducted for the report *Migrant Worker Remittances and Burma*, by Burma Economic Watch, 96% of migrants affirmed that the primary use of remittances was to fund basic survival.

The process of verification in Thailand, though slated to provide more legal transparency for registered migrants, has been criticized for an overly complicated application process, with inaccessibility for the majority of non-Thai speaking Burmese migrant workers, and the absence of any provision to protect Burmese migrant workers against the widespread fear of extortion from family back home who receive remittance money. Often as a result, migrants have remained unregistered, and thus susceptible to economic and financial abuse inside the country. By remaining unregistered migrants are also targeted for deportation by the RTG immigration police.

Burmese migrants end up returning to Burma through 3 methods. The first, and least desired by migrants is through actual arrest by Thai Immigration police. Migrants are ultimately deported, but not before facing detention of 3 to 6 months², work release to pay off arrest and loss of belongings and money to pilfering by individual officers.

As an alternative, thousands of migrants from locations all over Thailand are now opting to return home with the money they have thus far made, rather than facing the risk of remaining unregistered and being arrested. The second method is to use the Thai immigration framework, and pay immigration officers money, in order to be transported to the border checkpoints on immigration trucks, listed as arrests but without spending time in jail. The third method used is to employ a broker who can transport and guide migrants to the border, and potentially across, easing potentially hazardous encounters with Thai and Burmese government agents or soldiers.

Key checkpoints extorting money from migrants:

Through research HURFOM field reporters found that the two primary border crossings through which migrants return to Burma are at the Mae Sot-Miawady crossing over the Thaung Yin (Moei) river, and at Three Pagoda Pass (TPP) in west-central Thailand.

In many cases the distance separating these two border crossings from the common destinations for many migrants is quite small. For example, from Myawaddy to Moulmein is only 200 km, while TPP is 96 km from Thanbyuzayat town and 72 km to Ye town. Yet despite these relatively short distances, between their initial border crossing and arrival home migrants encounter between 30 to 50 checkpoints. The majority of these are informal, assembled



A checkpoint is seen in Anankwin village, operated by TC No.3 in Kyainnseiky Township in February 2010.

² The time migrants are detained varies considerably based on their ability to pay for their release and depending on when vehicles are available to deport the arrested migrants.

ad hoc by different pro-government and ethnic forces, and inconsistent in whether they extort money. The key gates that often take the most of migrants' remittance money, and are perpetually manned, are noted below.

Departing from Myawaddy towards Moulmein, the first checkpoint encountered is Tingan Nyi Naung "economic zone", and it is administered by a DKBA and SPDC force. The second major check point is near Tha Piq, also manned by a SPDC and DKBA combined force. There is a third at Kawkareik town run by the SPDC, State Police and immigration officials, and a final 3 are located at the bridge crossings, of Kyaing Kawkareik, Kyaing Zartapying, and Artaran bridges; each is administered by the municipal authorities.

From TPP migrants often travel to two primary destinations, Thanbyuzayat and Ye towns. Outside of TPP migrants encounter the first two major checkpoints in Chaungzone, one administered by the DKBA and the other manned by a force containing combined troops from the NMSP, KPF, SPDC and DKBA. A third is encountered at Myaing Taryar and is manned by forced from the Karen Peace Force (KPF). A fourth run by the Karen National Union (KNU) is crossed at Yaeda Youk or Meslie Village depending on KNU troop movements, and a fifth and sixth at Taungzon and Anankwin respectively, both administrated by SPDC soldiers. At Anankwin the road splits, with one route taking migrants towards Thanbyuzayat and the other taking them to Ye. Finishing the journey to Ye, migrants encounter 3 more checkpoints at Yaetagon, administered by the SPDC, DKBA, NMSP; another is at the start of Thanbyuzayat/Ye highway; and the final large checkpoint is encountered entering into Thanbyuzayat, and is manned by SPDC police force from the Immigration, Traffic and Secret Police branches.

Heading towards Yeh, migrants cross a checkpoint administered by the KNU near Anankwin or in Baelamu depending on KNU troop movements. The next checkpoint is encountered in Mawkanin and administered by local Burmese Secret Police (SP) and soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) No. 106. Extortion reaches an extreme pitch as migrants enter Ye township, where they encounter a larger checkpoint that is manned by a combined group of Special Police, Immigration police, local militias and Infantry Battalion (IB) No. 61. Extortion is so high and unpredictable for migrant workers that some trucks carrying migrants are unwilling to enter into the city. To disguise their status, migrants must disembark and instead finish their journey on a bus coming from another direction to obscure the fact that they are returning from Thailand.

Departure and extortion of migrants at Three Pagoda Pass:

A HURFOM field reporter interviewed numerous migrants who have returned to Burma between the second week of January and March 2010, and reported that large number of interviewees paid Thai immigration officials to transport them to the border so they could return home. Depending on the distance from their original workplace to TPP, they paid from 4,500 to 6,000 baht for transportation to the border crossing. In many other cases, migrants returned home with the assistance of a broker. Often beginning with



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Burmese migrant workers seen with Burmese officials after just crossing through the checkpoint into Three Pagoda Pass town, Burma during the 1st week of March, 2010.

a broker in Thailand that is able to get the migrant to the TPP, contact is made by the Thai broker with a Burmese counterpart, who will find the specific migrant worker, after the worker's passage through the immigration checkpoint at TPP.

At Three Pagoda Pass, migrants must cross through a single immigration checkpoint to enter Burma. While alternative illegal

crossings are available, each one is staffed by an immigration department official who will demand 300 baht, even if the migrant is not officially noted as having returned to Burma. Administered by the SPDC Immigration Department, authorities require migrants to identify themselves so that they can be charged a 300 baht reentry fee. Often immigration authorities are able to draw the distinction between TPP residents and migrant workers by sight alone, so that very few migrants are able to escape paying immigration fees. By being identified as migrants re-immigrating to Burma, they face a greater likelihood of increased arbitrary taxation by border agents.

According to research conducted by a HURFOM field reporter, between January and March 2010 passenger lists registered by truck drivers at the immigration border crossing station indicated that around 50,000 workers crossed into Burma to return home along the Three Pagoda Pass to Thanbyuzayat motor road. Given even this estimate of remigration, the border crossing would make a profit of over 15 million baht (468,750 USD).

Once through the immigration gate, migrants are approached by Burmese brokers, provided the migrant is not already affiliated with a broker, and various services are proposed, such as accommodation and truck transportation. Beyond the immigration gate, migrants must travel into TPP town to reach the truck station to continue their journey.

According to one broker, the vast majority of migrant workers cannot expect to successfully return home unaided due to the large volumes of taxation and extortion encountered along the way. After paying the immigration fee, HURFOM has found that the average price brokers in TPP will charge for a trip home is approximately 1,000 to 1,500 baht for every migrant worker who is returning home. This ends up providing brokers with a profit of just 100 to 300 baht for each migrant who hires the broker's services for returning home, as the 1,200 remaining baht is used for extortion and bribe costs encountered along the road.



Burmese migrant workers cross the border from Thailand into Burma at Three Pagoda Pass town during the 1st week of March, 2010.

One broker from the TPP area broke the above-mentioned costs down for HURFOM's field reporter, illustrating how the amount charged of each migrant worker was distributed between different authorities. To immigration officers, migrants must pay 500 Baht, to local police 50 baht, to traffic police 20 baht, to local militia 20 baht and to the fire brigade 10 baht.

For the truck rental, migrants pay between 30,000 and 50,000 kyat, though the driver only retains about 8,000 kyat per person per person.

With no guaranteed system of security for migrants' personal belongings during the return trip, these items placed in barrels on trucks. Each barrel also requires a payment of 1,300 to 1,500 to the broker, again to cover taxation and extortion costs. "For one plastic barrel that contains around 50 kilograms, they have to pay truck drivers 1,500 baht," explained a broker. "For smaller ones, around 30 kilograms, [they pay] 800 baht and for electric products they pay depending on their size."

Ko Minn Thein, a 29 year old migrant worker originally from Khayar village, Kyaikmayaw Township in Mon State, lived and worked in Nakhon Prathom Province, Thailand for 3 years. He was arrested in the second

week of February for having remained in Thailand on an expired work permit. He was detained in jail for a week, after which he was able to bribe a police officer to be freed before his term ended.

I was arrested and paid money after I was detained in small cell [in a small jail at Nakhon Prathom Province's police station]. When the police force transferred me to the Immigration Bureau, I paid 2,000 baht to avoid from being detained for 2 or 3 month like others those who could not afford to pay... On the 23rd of February, I was transferred along with 60 other arrested migrant workers, to the border town of Three Pagoda Pass (TPP). A group of authorities from Thai Immigration Bureau took all of us to the border of TPP....When I got to Burma (TPP Burma soil), all of us were required to register with the SPDC Immigration authorities and ordered to pay 300 baht per each person. There were 130 migrant workers [that had arrived] carried by two 10 wheels trucks that belonged to Thai Immigration Bureau. The Burmese Immigration locally known as *Lawaka* usually earns a lot of money per week. Can you imagine [how much they make when] they take 300 baht pay deported worker. There are thousands of illegal workers like me deported from Thailand to this TPP crossing every month.

Ko Minn Thein reports that he was able to hire a truck for a negotiated price of 35,000 kyat (Bt 1,093). Along the trip, the truck encountered 28 checkpoints each of which took a portion of the transportation fee he had paid to the driver. However, because he was able to hire the driver who took responsibility in facilitating the payments to checkpoints, he was able to return home without additional trouble.

Upon returning home, Ko Minn Thein encountered other migrants who had returned because of the national verification policy. He describes his feelings regarding the registration process for the temporary passport:

I got home on the 4th week of February. I met a lot of friends who had gone back before me. Some of them had been arrested – deported by the Thai police – and some of them had decided to go back with brokers before the authorities cracked down at their work places and residences. Most of the people who I talked with were not willing to make temporary passports as ordered by the two governments [RTG & SPDC]. I also felt insecure about the passport because I don't trust the SPDC authorities. They never fully fulfill what they have promised. So, I didn't want to fill the form and apply for the passport. During my time working in Nakhon Prathom, Thailand, more than 6 agents came and tried to persuade us to register for passports by using their assistance.

With the sudden influx of migrant workers into Burma, securing some means of income at home has become difficult. Ko Minn Thein noted to HURFOM that by the time of his arrival home, migrants had already begun to return to Thailand:

Life in the village without a job is very difficult to survive. People have started to go back to Thailand illegally already day-by-day. I would say that there are approximately 500 villagers [most of them are men] that have already left my village in the last 30 days, to seek the jobs in Thailand. My parents asked me to stay with them and work with them on the family run farm. But I don't want to stay under a bad government and work as hand-to-mouth worker. I will go back and work in Thailand again when the situation becomes more stable....The local authorities announced that in this year, there will be a democratic government after the authorities held the general election nation wide. However, people who know the political situation have said the new government will be of the same members from this government and the situation will not change very much. This information makes me want to go and work in Thailand again. I will wait until the end of water festival and for now, I am going to find temporary jobs and save some money for reaching the Thai soil again.

Departure and extortion of migrants at Myawaddy:

At Mae Sot, while a Friendship Bridge exists, the vast majority of migrant workers, both under their own power, or via deportation by Thai authorities, cross the river by boat as most migrants do not possess either Burmese or Thai identification. 11 gates are available where migrants can disembark, though most enter Burma at gate no. 10. No. 10, locally known as “zero” gate, is controlled by Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Brigade No. 999, which has a permanent camp built at the gate. No. 10 gate is most frequently used due to its immediate proximity to the truck station. The result is an immediate financial benefit to DKBA forces, as immigration fees and the illegal sales of Thai products, such as noodles, and shampoo, go directly to DKBA coffers.

A February report by Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) entitled *Abuse between borders* highlights the ongoing economic exploitation at the Mae Sot to Myawaddy border crossing. Targeting three checkpoints operated by the DKBA, KHRG shows how even relatively small amounts of money taken for a border crossing quickly build into significant funds. They note that at just one checkpoint, DKBA forces are likely earn nearly 200,000 baht a week, which extrapolates to nearly 10.5 million baht per year.

Taking this data into account, it is important consider the both the losses suffered by individual migrants, and the larger economic impact, of draining this remittance money from communities in Burma.

Nai Wengtamoï worked in Thailand as migrant laborer for 8 years before returning to Burma by crossing the river at Mae Sot-Myawaddy. On January 19th he decide to go back home after Thai authorities refused his attempt to extend his work permit and insisted he register for the temporary passport. He recounted to HURFOM that he did not want to apply for the passport but was told by his boss that if he refused, he

should go back home, since immigration police would arrest him if he continued to live at the work facility.



A truck transports Burmese migrant workers from Three Pagoda Pass to Ye town, Ye Township at the end of December, 2009.

Nai Wengtamoï explained about how fears arose amongst migrant workers as they learned about the national verification policy:

The news spread, all migrant workers will be arrested who do not have passports and who do not register for the passport. Most migrant workers were worried for their relatives who still live in villages [in Burma] that the local authorities would come and make a profit collecting

money from families personally, and having to pay more arbitrary taxes. I was also worried about that so I decided to go back home.

On January 22nd Nai Wengtamoï began his return trip, paying 6,500 baht to get from his work place to Myawaddy. The broker he hired initially told him and the group of migrant workers he was traveling with he would provide them with brokerage services until they got home. However, when Nai Wengtamoï and his 5 friends arrived at Mae Sot the broker asked them for an additional 500 baht per migrant, and to pay for the cost of his food as well.

On January 23rd they crossed from Mae Sot to Myawaddy. They could not travel legally over the friendship bridge due to the expiration of their worker ID's. Instead they were transported down the river on floating tires till they reached the DKBA No. 10 gate. At the DKBA checkpoint, they had to pay 100 baht per person to the checkpoint authorities, and were able to cross into the truck station in Myawaddy where they planed to hire a truck that would send them back home.

At that point, Ma Khin Aye, their 44 year-old broker, abandoned them at the truck station, taking the 7,000 baht each migrant had given him to cover their complete trips home. As a result, the group had to make the return journey on their own. During the return journey, the group was forced to pay off a series of Burmese authorities such as immigration officials, traffic police, national police and local militias, as they had no broker to assist in the crossing process. Each migrant had to pay additional fees to pass checkpoints, ranging between 5,000 kyat, 3,000 kyat and 1,000 kyat.

Nai Win Tun a 25 year old migrant from the group complained, "When I worked in Thailand [I] was not free, but now we arrive in our own country and [we are] still not free or safe from threats."

Upon arriving home they were also met with efforts to extort the money that they had earned while working in Thailand. They reported to HURFOM that the headman and local Burmese battalion soldiers living in the village came and requested fees, and threatened the migrants if they complained. When the returning migrants informed the Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) of their return, for the purpose of residence registration, they also had to pay fines to the VPDC office.

Nai Wengtamoi complained to the HURFOM field reporter, frustrated that “The VPDC also demands money – they think that we earned a lot of money from [working in] foreign countries. They never think of the difficult lives we are living in Thailand...”

Mi Kon Aye, a 32 year-old from Nygan village, Kyaikmayaw Township told HURFOM how after her work permit expired her boss refused to accept her employment anymore, fearing the reprisals from a potential police arrest of an illegal migrant at his facility. As a result of the expiration of work permits, around 40 workers had to quit their jobs at the facility. Their Thai employer suggested to them that they go back to Burma to apply for the passport. He told them that after they received passports they could return to Thailand and work for him again.

Mi Kon Aye hired a broker for 5,000 Baht, to get to Mae Sot. In Mi Kon Aye’s case, 5,000 baht is what she would earn if she saved her Thai income for two months.

She reported that on the return trip they encountered many checkpoints, most of which demanded money. While the broker had initially promised her that after using her 5,000 baht to pay for passage, he would take responsibility for the travel costs, but instead she reported that she had to take full responsibility for her traveling costs. At some checkpoints she was threatened and in some cases arrested and put in jail, with checkpoint authorities demanding more money for her release. By the time she arrived in Moulmein, she had paid an additional 30,000 kyat (29 USD), as opposed to conventional passengers, such as traders or citizens with Burmese ID cards, whom a HURFOM field reporter has found to pay an average of 10,000 kyat for the same travel costs.

Mi Kon Aye’s case specifically highlights the inconsistency returning migrants face as people with no real legal support or status. Though informal structures exist to provide migrants with support, inconsistency is pervasive, without accountability, and a migrant’s status is likely to ensure they will be targeted for extortion.

Mi Kon Aye explained the difference she observed between crossing from Thailand to Burma:

When we lived in Thailand we didn’t need to be afraid of others except the Thai police, but they did not demand money like Burmese authorities do. They did not threaten us and did not say bad words [to us] like the Burmese authorities do. They do not care about us [by causing trouble]. It was difficult in Thailand but the Burmese [authorities] don’t care.

When she returned home she was required to visit the VPDC office to sign documents in which her mother had to come and make a guarantee for Mi Kon Aye to live in the house and she had to re-register as a resident. As noted in previous HURFOM reports from December 2009 and February 2010 ³, due to the widespread collection of house lists by Burmese authorities for election preparations, many migrants returning to work in Burma were stricken from registration lists. As a result, the VPDC ordered her to pay 5,000 kyat for registration.

Mi Kon Aye has reported that since her arrival home around two weeks ago, she has endured many extortion attempts, purportedly to pay for costs such as village militia fees and fire brigade fees. She estimates she and her fellow villagers pay about 5,000 kyat a month to various extortion efforts. She has told HURFOM that she now wants to return to Thailand due to the exorbitant extortion costs and the lack of any jobs or potential income in the village.

“When I lived Thailand I didn’t need to worry about getting food because all money I earned was mine, but when I arrived home all the money I saved I used there [at home],” explained Mi Kon Aye. “I have to provide [money to] them [Burmese authorities] monthly. I can’t spend any of my money for myself.”

Mehm Win Tun who is 25 year-old, and originally from Damatha village, Kyaikmayaw Township, worked in Thailand for about 6 years. On January 22nd he and his 14 friends were arrested by Thai police at his workplace.

³ “We have to try”: Mounting pressure in election preparations and responses from the Mon State community, December 2009, and Burmese government pressure on communities for support in 2010 election , February 2010.

After he was arrested, Thai police detained him at a local police station for week before he was send to a jail. He reported that the jail was not large, but that Thai police nevertheless detained about 200 inmates in the jail. He reported overcrowding, and that the prison population was comprised of arrested migrant workers, and actual convicted criminals. He faced difficulties such as finding food, shelter and a place to sleep. After two weeks he was sent to Mae Sot, but found that the police only returned 1,000 of the 3,000 baht he had been arrested with.

He and another 75 migrants were sent to Mae Sot in Immigration Authority vehicles which did not directly cross the Friendship Bridge linking Mae Sot to Myawaddy. Instead, they took all 76 people to a processing center in Mae Sot, where Mehm Win Tun and 6 others hired a broker for 3,000 baht per migrant, to cross with them by boat into Burma and take them home. Once in Burma, they had to immediately cross through a DKBA Brigade No. 999 administered checkpoint. When they crossed through the DKBA camp, a DKBA soldier pointed a gun at them and demanded money from all the members of the group. The broker paid the DKBA soldiers 100 baht per member of the group. Mehm Win Tun reported that the DKBA forces seized personal belongings from migrants crossing the checkpoint. In some cases soldiers took migrants' best clothes, one took a watch from a member of Mehm Win Tun's group and some took shoes from other migrant workers.

According to Win Tun, the trip went relatively smoothly, due to their use of a broker to negotiate the checkpoints on the return trip, "On the way to Moulmein there are about 50 check points were controlled by different ethnic soldiers. We all arrived in Moulmein smoothly because of the broker."

When he arrived home, he paid the broker approximately 3,000 baht (10,000 kyat). Upon his return, he had to inform the village headman and the local militia. He had to re-register for a residence record and make a new identity card. He was charged 5,000 kyat by the VPDC.

Mehm Win Tun encountered changes that had happened in his absence, and noted how the local economy has been affected the significant drop in remittances:

When I got home there were many people who had already back home because Thai bosses did not allow them to continue working. Some came back to make a passport. Many of the people in the village had become regime informants. They would give all information on what happens in the village to local authorities [in exchange for money]. Life in the village is not easy because there are many cases of extortion, such as militia costs and other fees [arbitrary taxes, cost for local ceremonies, VIP costs, etc.] Villagers are facing a very difficult situation for payment to regime servants. In the past most villagers relied on money from outside [Thailand], but now many of them are back and no money is being sent back.

Win Tun told HURFOM's field reporter the experience of a migrant worker relative who had come back from Three Pagoda Pass via the motor road to Thanbyzayat. At a Burmese military checkpoint in Anankwin, his relative was detained and had to pay 5,000 kyat because of he did not have his identity card. At the check point, staff members also seized the property this man was bringing back from TPP, such as Thai noodles, sweet juice, and other products from Thailand.

"At those check points, instead of helping their people who suffer from different kinds of difficulties, they are making a profit from them," said Win Tun. "When they see [people's] weak points they only want to get more money. They don't care what happens to others."

Mi Mow Win, a 33 year old from Kyaik Pow village, in Pegu Township was arrested in Mae Sot.

After I was arrested by Thai authorities they sized my 1,200 baht and cell phone. They took me to near the Thaug Yin River – I had to cross that river by a floating tire. There are some men who helped me to cross and I had to pay them 50 Baht for their services, even though I had no money at that time.

When she arrived at the DKBA checkpoint soldiers detained her and she had to make a phone call to her relative and they gave her names of brokers to contact. When she got a broker, soldiers asked the broker for 800 baht for her release. After this, the broker demanded 3,300 Baht in exchange for taking her home.

I did not want to go back to my hometown yet because I already knew there were no jobs for me, on the other hand I also could not work in Thailand because of not having a passport. However my boss

persuaded me to do a passport. At that time I had not enough money yet. I was still thinking to register for it but I and another of my coworkers, and about 45 people, were arrested first.

“Along the motor road from Myawaddy to Moulmein, there are many check points –among them there are about three check points that are very strict on travelers,” she described. “Authorities checked travelers to see about identity cards, and for any other reason.” Migrants unable to meet demands at checkpoints were detained, and their personal belongings seized, a process Mi Mow Win reports having seen many times during her return trip. She reported that while on her journey home, she saw many people detained. She recounted an incident when after seeing other migrants arrested, she asked her broker why those people were stopped. He told her that those people had not paid the amount authorities demanded, and explained his net income was 500 Baht per migrant he transported back, having had to spend the majority of her original brokerage fee on extortion.

Mi Mow Win described her experiences once she arrived home, and her difficulties re-entering her community:

I didn't know what to do after I got to my village. I already knew there are no jobs for [me] in the village. I did not want to stay yet I had to apply for a passport. After I got to my village, I saw that my [fellow] villagers faced many different kinds of hardships in their lives. They faced many different types of extortion for many reasons, such as militia fees, security fees and sentry duty fees. Villagers had to spend about 10,000 kyat a month [on these costs]. At my grandparent's house they had to sell their rice to pay for those fees. They are so old – their ages are about 70 year-old – but they still had to pay for those fees.

Mi Mow Win said to the HURFOM field reporter, “I don't want to live in this village any longer, I've already decided to leave village as soon as possible after I get my temporary passport to work [in Thailand].”

Conclusion:

The current crisis of rapid expulsion of migrant workers, through fear or forced deportation, is likely to have a severe impact on the economies of both Thailand and Burma. Thailand, whose economy is heavily supported by low-cost labor performed by migrant workers, will not find these jobs filled by Thais. As noted in the personal accounts gathered by HURFOM, Thai employers are already working to bring their laborers back.

The effect of such a sudden loss of remittance money for Burma's local economy will likely be catastrophic for an economy already plagued with inflation, and with nearly zero job availability. With the vast majority of remittance money sent home from Thailand to be used for basic survival, the forced return of migrants will remove remittances, a key financial pillar and possibly the only source of reliable income available to sustain their families' livelihoods in Burma. For migrants that must return home, either permanently or to produce a temporary passport, a significant portion of money is directly funding both administrators and soldiers from the Burmese government, as well as the newly formed pro government cease fire groups. These groups, tasked with acting as proxy border guards under the April 2009 SPDC border guard proposal, receive most of their financial benefits from local economic kickbacks by demanding taxes, extortion, seizure of goods, and operation of illegal black market trade gates.

HURFOM believes that this policy of returning migrant workers to Burma works directly counter to the primary interests of Thailand's financial and political sectors. By deporting large numbers of migrant workers over a short time, Thailand is creating a system that is neither a permanent solution to illegal migration, nor one that will promote economic stability in the region.

The departure of migrants immediately cuts off crucial remittances sent home. Though this may benefit the few corrupt officials along the border, the larger and more lasting negative impact of these deportations is that hundreds of thousands of families in Burma are denied a significant means of income that is crucial for survival. By further destabilizing the Burmese economy in this way, it is likely that Thailand will in fact perpetuate a climate of economic instability in Burma, increasing the likelihood that migrants will eventually return, and in even greater numbers, to try and live through worse economic conditions than those that had initially driven them to work in Thailand in the first place.

Even as this report is published, HURFOM field reporters have observed 700 to 1000 migrant workers gathering on the border, preparing to reenter Thailand. Without a more long-term worker registration plan in place, and pressure by the RTG to on the SPDC to address the issue of checkpoint corruption and remittance theft, migrants from Burma will continue to try to enter Thailand illegally, under increasingly desperate conditions.