



Mekong Migration Network (MMN)



PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS
DAY PANEL DISCUSSION "NEIGHBOURS IN NEED:
MIGRATION FROM MYANMAR"

18 DECEMBER 2024, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

ORGANISED BY THE MEKONG MIGRATION NETWORK AND THE REGIONAL CENTER FOR
SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES,
CHIANG MAI UNIVERSITY

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Proceedings of the 2024 International Migrants Day Panel Discussion “Neighbours in Need: Migration from Myanmar”

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Secretariat in Thailand: P.O. Box 195, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50202, Thailand

Secretariat in Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, c/o Kowloon Union Church, 4 Jordan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Email: info@mekongmigration.org

Website: www.mekongmigration.org

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in the proceedings are those of the event’s discussants and audience members and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the Mekong Migration Network.

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), founded in 2003, is a sub-regional network of migrant support organisations, migrant grassroots groups, and research institutes. The central goal of MMN is to promote and protect the welfare, well-being, dignity, and human rights of migrant workers and their families in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and to build mutual support and solidarity among migrants and migrant rights advocates within the sub-region. To achieve this goal, MMN jointly carries out research, information monitoring, advocacy, capacity building, and networking.

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Discussants:

Opening Remarks

Dr. Chanida Suwanprasit, Deputy Dean for Research and International Relations, Chiang Mai University

Ms. Reiko Harima, Regional Coordinator, Mekong Migration Network

Panel Discussion 1: The Current Context of Migration from Myanmar

Dr. Sirada Khemanitthathai, School of International Affairs, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University

Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, and Steering Committee Chairperson, Mekong Migration Network

Ms. Eve, Young Chi Oo Workers Association

Naw Wahkushee, Karen Peace Support Network

Panel Discussion 2: Precarious Status: The Thai Government’s Policies to Grant Permanent Residency and Citizenship to Migrants

Ms. Sommai Jantawong

Mr. Sai Kaw

Closing Remarks

Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, and Steering Committee Chairperson, Mekong Migration Network

Moderators

Mr. Artid Pabun, MMN Advocacy and Research Coordinator, and Ms. Jackie Pollock, MMN Member

MMN Secretariat Organising Team

Ms. Reiko Harima, Mr. Artid Pabun, Mr. Brang Aung Ja, Ms. Noriko Morita, Ms. Suphit Chaihong, and Ms. Alice Benedetti

Documentation and Writing of the Proceedings

Ms. Carli Melo, MMN Consultant

Layout

Mr. Brang Aung Ja

Last, but by no means least, MMN would like to express our sincere gratitude to the many migrants who shared their stories for the exhibition, to RCSD for hosting the event, and to Solidar Suisse for their generous support in making this event possible.

Mekong Migration Network

December 2024

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CBO	Community-based Organisation
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IMD	International Migrants Day
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KPSN	Karen Peace Support Network
MAP	Migrant Assistance Program
MMN	Mekong Migration Network
NSC	Office of the National Security Council
RCSD	Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development
SAC	State Administration Council
THB	Thai Baht
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
YCOWA	Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association

INTRODUCTION

On International Migrants Day, 18 December 2024, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN), in collaboration with the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University, hosted a panel discussion and exhibition titled: “Neighbours in Need: Migration from Myanmar”. The public event, held at Chiang Mai University’s Faculty of Social Sciences, was attended by over 100 people, including civil society organisation (CSO) representatives, academics, migrant workers, students, and members of the general public.

Context for the Event

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has triggered mass mixed migration. The post-coup violence, economic collapse, and humanitarian catastrophe has prompted large numbers of people from Myanmar to cross borders in search of safety, survival, and sustainable livelihoods. Those seeking to migrate have very few options and are caught between a slow and expensive labour migration scheme run by Myanmar’s military junta and a dangerous clandestine journey across borders.

These troubling circumstances have sparked renewed concern among human rights advocates regarding the situation of those leaving conflict-ridden Myanmar. Recent legal and policy developments in Myanmar that enforce remittances, double taxation, and military conscription have heightened these concerns and exacerbated an already precarious situation. Irregular migration has increased as people flee to avoid conscription, arrest, and armed conflict and to seek refuge and livelihood opportunities. Migrants who are already documented in Thailand risk losing their legal immigration status as they fear the consequences of approaching the Myanmar Embassy and Consulate to renew their identity documents.

At the same time, the Thai Cabinet decision, made on 29 October 2024, to streamline the approval process for granting permanent residency and citizenship to long-term migrants in Thailand and their Thailand-born children is a welcome development. It is also a timely reminder of the hundreds of thousands of people who officially remain ‘stateless’, including camp-based refugees who are excluded from the permanent residency process. Given the ongoing conflict and dire economic situation in Myanmar, recent and long-term migrants have no viable options of return and must seek ways to survive and support their families in Thailand.

MMN’s Response to Myanmar’s Crisis

Deeply concerned about this situation, MMN conducted research and published its findings in a 2023 paper titled: “Neighbours in Need: Examining Thailand’s Response to Mixed Migration from Post-Coup Myanmar”.¹ The study presents an analysis of Thailand’s policy approach concerning Myanmar migrants entering Thailand after the coup, along with concrete recommendations for policymakers to improve the situation for these migrants.

Additionally, in March 2024, MMN issued a statement on the “Impact of Myanmar’s Forced Remittance, Double Taxation and Military Conscription Policies on Migrants”.² The statement urges migrant destination countries and other stakeholders to safeguard the rights and well-being of Myanmar migrants, particularly concerning their savings and remittances, to prevent double taxation, and to facilitate the regularisation of migrants fleeing conscription.

1 MMN, August 2023, “Neighbours in Need: Examining Thailand’s Response to Mixed Migration from Post-Coup Myanmar”, accessible online at <https://mekongmigration.org/?p=22097>.

2 MMN, March 2024, “Impact of Myanmar’s Forced Remittance, Double Taxation and Military Conscription Policies on Migrants”, accessible online at <https://mekongmigration.org/?p=23157>.

MMN's International Migrants Day Panel Discussion and Exhibition

Building off these initiatives, MMN organised a panel discussion and an exhibition on International Migrants Day to highlight these issues. During the first panel, representatives of migrant and refugee-support CSOs and experts on migration from Myanmar to Thailand shared their views and updated the public on the current situation. Bringing attention to people's mixed motivations for migration, including to seek refuge, employment, or both, the panel examined the complexities of post-coup migrants' experiences and vulnerabilities and discussed ways to improve their situations.

In the second panel discussion, two long-term migrants shared their personal experiences of living as stateless people in Thailand and navigating processes to gain permanent residency. An update on the Thai Cabinet's October 2024 decision to streamline approval processes for granting permanent residency and citizenship to long-term migrants in Thailand and their Thailand-born children was also presented.

In addition to the two panels, MMN launched an exhibition featuring migrants' stories and photos. Through the exhibition, the voices of migrants living in Chiang Mai, Phang Nga, Samut Sakhon, and Sangkhlaburi were shared, reflecting a mix of migration motivations and experiences across various employment sectors and geographical settings. Part of the exhibition was dedicated to stories from migrant agricultural workers as many recent arrivals are filling labour shortages in Thailand's agriculture sector. The exhibition was on display from 18 to 26 December 2024 on the Ground Floor of the Faculty of Social Sciences Building at Chiang Mai University.

MMN circulated a press release³ about the event and the event was reported on by Lanner News⁴ and Prachatai⁵ in Thai and the Irrawaddy⁶ in Burmese.



3 MMN, December 2024, "[Press Release] Neighbours in Need: Call for Comprehensive Protection for Migrants from Myanmar", accessible online at <https://mekongmigration.org/?p=23780>.

4 Lanner News, 19 December 2024, "MMN' เปิดเวทีฟังเสียงคนย้ายถิ่น ร้องรัฐไทยต้องคุ้มครองแรงงานข้ามชาติ", accessible online [in Thai] at <https://www.lannernews.com/19122567-01/>.

5 Prachatai, 21 December 2024, "เรียกร้องไทยเร่งให้ความคุ้มครองแรงงานพม่าอย่างรอบคอบ" accessible online [in Thai] at <https://prachatai.com/journal/2024/12/111789>.

6 Irrawaddy, 18 December 2024, "ချင်းမိုင်တကုကသိုလ်တွင် မြန်မာလူ့ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များအရင်းအမြစ်များ" accessible online [in Burmese] at https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1008104051362782&id=100064895881172&mibextid=w wXlfr&rdid=cilelss3SU4lgUvv.

EVENT PROGRAMME

13:00-13:15	<p>Opening Remarks</p> <p>Dr. Chanida Suwanprasit, Deputy Dean for Research and International Relations, Chiang Mai University</p> <p>Ms. Reiko Harima, MMN Regional Coordinator</p>
13:15-15:00	<p>Panel Discussion 1: The Current Context of Migration from Myanmar</p> <p>Moderator: Ms. Jackie Pollock, MMN Member</p> <p>Discussant 1: "Migration from crisis-ridden Myanmar"</p> <p>Dr. Sirada Khemanitthathai, School of International Affairs, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University</p> <p>Discussant 2: "Migrants in agriculture: precarious work and mixed migration",</p> <p>Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, and MMN Steering Committee Chairperson</p> <p>Discussant 3: "Impact of the coup on labour conditions in Mae Sot"</p> <p>Ms. Eve, Yang Chi Oo Workers Association</p> <p>Discussant 4: "The displacement of Karen peoples since the coup"</p> <p>Naw Wahkushee, Karen Peace Support Network</p> <p>Open discussion</p>
15:00-15:30	<p>Tour of the Exhibition</p> <p>Facilitators: Ms. Noriko Morita, MMN Consultant, and Ms. Alice Benedetti, MMN Intern</p>
15:30-16:30	<p>Panel Discussion 2: Precarious Status: The Thai Government's Policies to Grant Permanent Residency and Citizenship to Migrants</p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Artid Pabun, MMN Advocacy and Research Coordinator</p> <p>Discussant 1: "Impact of the policies concerning citizenship"</p> <p>Ms. Sommai Jantawong</p> <p>Discussant 2: "Impact of the policies concerning permanent residency"</p> <p>Mr. Sai Kaw</p> <p>Open discussion</p>
16:30-16:50	<p>Closing Remarks</p> <p>Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, and MMN Steering Committee Chairperson</p>

OPENING REMARKS

Welcome remarks by Dr. Chanida Suwanprasit, Deputy Dean for Research and International Relations, Chiang Mai University

On behalf of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University, Dr. Chanida Suwanprasit, Deputy Dean for Research and International Relations, officially opened the event, welcoming all participants. She began by extending her gratitude to the Mekong Migration Network for bringing everyone together and Ms. Reiko Harima, MMN Regional Coordinator, for her leadership and dedication to making the event possible. Dr. Suwanprasit recognised each of the discussants, thanking them for their time and acknowledging their expertise related to migration from Myanmar to Thailand. “Today’s event comes at a critical time in the region, looking at the impacts of the post-2021 crisis in Myanmar,” Dr. Suwanprasit shared. She expressed her confidence that, through the discussion and exhibition, “we can deepen our understanding, find opportunities to work together towards solutions, and support migrant communities.”

Introduction to the event by Ms. Reiko Harima, Regional Coordinator, Mekong Migration Network

Following Dr. Suwanprasit, Ms. Reiko Harima, MMN Regional Coordinator, thanked the audience members and speakers for their participation and RCSD for their unwavering support in hosting the event. MMN, she explained, is a sub-regional network of civil society organisations working towards the promotion and protection of migrant workers’ rights. MMN members operate across the Greater Mekong Sub-region, including in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. While MMN’s work extends beyond the Thailand-Myanmar migration corridor, this corridor has been the focus of MMN’s more recent activities given the “increasingly worrying situation facing migrant workers from Myanmar because of the military coup and the crisis that happened afterwards and more recently because of military conscription, as well as forced remittances and double taxation policies imposed by the military authorities in Myanmar, all of which create significant burdens for migrant workers who have already been suffering from exploitation and challenges,” Ms. Harima stated.

MMN has been closely monitoring this situation and, in 2023, released the report “Neighbours in Need: Examining Thailand’s Response to Mixed Migration from Post-Coup Myanmar”.⁷ The report elaborates on the lack of a comprehensive support system for migrants and refugees in Thailand, as well as a general lack of compassion in the region towards people leaving Myanmar. In March 2024, MMN also released a statement on the “Impact of Myanmar’s Forced Remittance, Double Taxation and Military Conscription Policies on Migrants”.⁸

Ms. Harima shared that one of the objectives of the 2024 International Migrants Day event was to present an update on the situation facing migrants from Myanmar in Thailand and to collectively explore ways to address Myanmar migrants’ increasing vulnerabilities. The first panel discussion, she explained, would draw on the concept of mixed migration, acknowledging that migration categories such as “forced migration” and “labour migration” are often blurred and that, in the current context of migration from Myanmar, political and economic motives for migration are often intertwined. Following the first panel, the audience would be directed to view MMN’s exhibition featuring Myanmar migrants’ stories and photos from Chiang Mai, Phang Nga, Samut Sakhon, and

7 MMN, August 2023, “Neighbours in Need: Examining Thailand’s Response to Mixed Migration from Post-Coup Myanmar”, accessible online at <https://mekongmigration.org/?p=22097>.

8 MMN, March 2024, “Impact of Myanmar’s Forced Remittance, Double Taxation and Military Conscription Policies on Migrants”, accessible online at <https://mekongmigration.org/?p=23157>.

Sangkhlaburi. These stories and photos were selected to highlight migrants' personal experiences, including their hopes and challenges, in regard to the current situation in Myanmar. Finally, the event would conclude with a panel discussing the Thai Cabinet's October 2024 decision to streamline approval processes for granting permanent residency and citizenship to long-term migrants in Thailand and people's personal experiences navigating these processes. Ms. Harima shared that a representative of the Office of the National Security Council was invited to speak on the matter, but, unfortunately, they were unable to attend.



Dr. Chanida Suwanprasit Delivering Welcome Remark

PANEL DISCUSSION 1: THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF MIGRATION FROM MYANMAR

Moderator: Ms. Jackie Pollock, Mekong Migration Network Member

After inviting the discussants to the stage, Ms. Jackie Pollock reminded the audience that it was International Migrants Day (IMD)—a day to “acknowledge the contributions migrants make to the economy, culture, and social life in countries across the world and, in our case, particularly the countries of the Mekong region, and to also acknowledge the difficulties and challenges that migration brings with it.” Ms. Pollock explained that although IMD is linked to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which only applies to migrant workers and excludes refugees and stateless persons, the panel is much more inclusive. The panel, she explained, will cover different forms of mixed migration “because people don’t fit neatly into defined categories; the reality of the lives and experiences of refugees, trafficked persons, or migrant workers is much more complex. People may also move between these categories in their lifetime.” Fortunately, mixed migration is gaining more recognition around the world. This is partly due to the need to acknowledge that people are and will increasingly need to move because of the changing climate and these movements do not fit into existing refugee and labour migration regimes. Moreover, the many conflicts around the world and growing economic instability are also contributing to mixed migration. “In Thailand, mixed migration is not a new concept,” Ms. Pollock stated. “From Myanmar, there has been mixed migration since at least the 1980s. Different approaches have been taken and different policies implemented at different times in response to the mixed migration movements into Thailand. Today, our expert panelists will give us an overview and analysis of the current responses in Thailand towards the current mixed migration trends.”

Discussant 1: Dr. Sirada Khemanitthathai, School of International Affairs, Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University

Migration from crisis-ridden Myanmar

Building off Ms. Pollock’s opening remarks, Dr. Sirada Khemanitthathai, Lecturer in the School of International Affairs in the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration at Chiang Mai University, presented a nuanced account of mixed migration from Myanmar to Thailand. To begin, Dr. Khemanitthathai described the multitude of crises that are afflicting Myanmar and contributing to widespread displacement. While many people may think of post-coup armed conflict as the primary push factor, Dr. Khemanitthathai drew attention to “other kinds of crises that are forcing people to leave their hometowns, not only internationally, but also internally. These crises are creating an atmosphere where people cannot maintain their well-being in their hometowns.” These other crises include political repression, such as the use of forced conscription by the military junta; an economic crisis; a humanitarian crisis, where many people are unable to access food and other necessities; a crisis in education; and an environmental crisis.

According to Dr. Khemanitthathai, these crises are prompting the migration of greater numbers of political exiles, refugees, migrant workers, students, and middle- and upper-class people. Specifically, political exiles and refugees include high-profile politicians, Civil Disobedience Movement activists, and those seeking refuge from armed conflict. She noted that some exiles and many refugees have become migrant workers in Thailand. As of November 2024, there were 2.28 million registered migrant workers and roughly 4,000 registered ‘skilled’ workers from Myanmar in Thailand. Many Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, however, are unregistered.

Being a migrant from Myanmar in Thailand comes with many challenges. Firstly, Dr. Khemanitthathai explained, irregular migrants are excluded from public services, social benefits, and (official parts of) the labour market in Thailand. Secondly, these individuals are vulnerable to exploitation, bribery, and

intimidation, including from police, immigration officers, and employers. Thirdly, some documented migrants become undocumented due to fear of interacting with military-appointed authorities at the Myanmar Embassy and Consulate to renew their identity documents. Relatedly, many political exiles, refugees, and migrants are fearful of deportation and transnational repression. Lastly, the Myanmar military-run State Administration Council's (SAC's) forced remittance and double taxation policies for migrants, use of biometric 'smart cards' to exit the country, and restrictions on the issuing of passports and other documents are all contributing to migrants' heightened insecurities. In light of these challenges, many people from Myanmar are adopting survival methods, such as holding incorrect types of documents, bribing authorities, and taking on jobs that do not align with their skills.

Thailand's lack of a comprehensive refugee policy further compounds these issues. The Thai government only recognises people fleeing from armed conflict along the Thai-Myanmar border as refugees, overlooking refugees fleeing from other parts of Myanmar and the irregular migration of political exiles. The limited number of people who are recognised by the Thai government are sheltered in temporary safety areas on a short-term basis. According to Dr. Khemanitthathai, one of the only options for political exiles and refugees from the inner areas of Myanmar to formally stay in Thailand is to register as a migrant worker. Those who do not register are categorised as “illegal migrants.” These trends highlight some of the ways in which Thailand has depoliticised the forced displacement of people from Myanmar. Dr. Khemanitthathai concluded her presentation by emphasising that, in light of compulsory conscription in Myanmar, “every Myanmar migrant can be considered political.”

Following the presentation, an audience member remarked on how Thailand is not a party to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and how the Thai public has historically regarded people from Myanmar as “enemies.” She asked Dr. Khemanitthathai whether she thought Thailand's policies towards refugees will change and what she thought of these public sentiments. Dr. Khemanitthathai responded by sharing that many government agencies in Thailand believe that national policies that are “too good”, such as the Refugee Convention, will act as pull factors, increasing the number of people seeking refuge in Thailand. She also warned against reproducing narratives that characterise Myanmar as “the enemy”—a tactic used by “ultra conservatives” to gain support in domestic politics. “We need to send more positive messages to Thai society...We need to try to share the message that migration benefits Thai society,” she asserted. The moderator, Ms. Pollock, reminded everyone that in addition to the Refugee Convention, Thailand has not ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. In relation to migration, Thailand has only ratified the Palermo Conventions on combatting human trafficking. She suggested that, as Thailand is not signatory to the Conventions narrowly categorising people on the move, this could be seen as an opportunity to advocate for a new national framework that protects all migrants regardless of their status and reasons for migrating.

Discussant 2: Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, and Steering Committee Chairperson, Mekong Migration Network

Migrants in agriculture: precarious work and mixed migration

Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director of MAP Foundation and Steering Committee Chairperson of MMN, presented on mixed migration and the situation facing migrants from Myanmar working in Thailand's agriculture sector. Beginning with contextual background, Mr. Press described how the COVID-19 pandemic hit Thailand in 2020 and resulted in lockdowns, food shortages, the voluntary repatriation of over 100 thousand migrants to Myanmar, and border closures. This was shortly followed by the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which was met with a Civil Disobedience Movement, deteriorating economic conditions, and conflict. This situation, along

with the introduction of mandatory military conscription in February 2024, has led to an increase in irregular outmigration from Myanmar. Mr. Press shared news article headlines highlighting how clandestine border crossings often involve many people being crammed into vehicles for large sums of money (for example, 25,000 Thai Baht per person) and are often dangerous, at times resulting in injury and death.

Mr. Press proceeded to explain some of the ways in which the SAC has been applying pressure on migrants. Firstly, as of September 2023, those who migrate from Myanmar through the formal Memorandum of Understanding channel must open a bank account jointly with their employment agency. Migrants are then required to remit 25 percent of their earnings monthly or every three months and employment agencies are obliged to report those who fail to do so. Secondly, in December 2023, the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok announced a tax rate of 2 percent on the earnings of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, which is equivalent to roughly 180 Thai Baht (THB) per month. The renewal of migrants' passports and other identity documents, which are needed to maintain their immigration and employment status, is contingent on paying this tax. Lastly, in order for people to leave Myanmar through official channels to seek work abroad, in addition to obtaining a passport for employment purposes, they must register with the Ministry of Labour and get an Overseas Worker Identification Card and a 'smart card', which collects their biometric data.

According to Mr. Press, to avoid financially supporting the military junta, many migrants are choosing alternative courses of action. For example, many migrants are continuing to use hundis (informal money transfer agents) to remit money home, avoiding unfair exchange rates and funding the military. In addition, many people have decided to cross into Thailand via informal channels or to not renew their documents while in Thailand, thus avoiding surveillance and paying into a military-run labour migration scheme. MAP Foundation has found that one of the safest jobs for undocumented migrants from Myanmar is in Thailand's agriculture sector as these jobs are relatively remote and safe from scrutiny, however, there are disadvantages to this type of work.

Drawing on the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) 2023 study "Seeking Opportunities Elsewhere: Exploring the Lives and Challenges of Myanmar Migrant Workers in Thailand",⁹ Mr. Press explained how the agriculture sector has the highest number of undocumented migrant workers (around half of the migrant workers in the sector) and pays the lowest wages (along with the garment and seafood processing industries) relative to other employment sectors. The UNDP study found that a lack of documents is an obstacle to accessing services and rights, and that undocumented migrants experience greater mental health issues and have significantly lower levels of access to health services.

In addition, a 2020 study on migrant agricultural workers in Thailand by MMN,¹⁰ of which MAP Foundation is a member, found that agricultural workers who are employed on a seasonal or daily basis are excluded from protections under Thailand's Labour Protection Act. They are instead covered by a Ministerial Regulation, which does not provide limits on maximum working hours, minimum wage guarantees, or entitlements to overtime wages and paid leave during the first 180 days of work. These workers are also excluded from protections under the Social Security Act and the Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Act. Moreover, MMN's research found that many of the study's respondents worked more than eight hours per day, did not receive any paid days off, used hazardous pesticides and fertilisers without proper training and equipment, and had experienced an accident or injury at work. Some of the respondents had also experienced unpaid wages, police raids, threats by employers, having their documents confiscated, and being prohibited from leaving their workplace.

⁹ UNDP, November 2023, "Seeking Opportunities Elsewhere: Exploring the Lives and Challenges of Myanmar Migrant Workers in Thailand", accessible online at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-12/undp-mmr_seeking-opportunities-elsewhere_nov_2023_final.pdf.

¹⁰ MMN, January 2020, "Migrant Agricultural Workers in Thailand", accessible online at <https://mekongmigration.org/?p=13821>.

To conclude the presentation, Mr. Press drew attention to the latest Cabinet Resolution, requiring Thailand’s 2.3 million migrant workers to register for or renew their work permit before 13 February 2025. He asked, “Can migrants afford it? There are extra costs for brokers and to expedite the process. What about those whose documents are expiring?” The newest registration policy further highlights the precarious situation facing Myanmar migrants in Thailand.

Discussant 3: Ms. Eve, Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association

Impact of the coup on labour conditions in Mae Sot

Ms. Eve, a representative of Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCOWA), presented on the impact of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar on labour conditions in Mae Sot, Thailand. She began her presentation by describing the post-coup situation facing workers in Myanmar. Ms. Eve explained that these workers are increasingly being informalised; not receiving a living wage; being discouraged from accessing legal assistance; and experiencing the effects of a lack of law enforcement and security (particularly following the mandatory conscription announcement). In addition, worker representatives and labour activists are being arrested at higher rates. Collectively, these conditions are contributing to increased outmigration to neighbouring countries, including Thailand, China, and India.

In Thailand, according to the Department of Employment, as of March 2024, there were 2,308,166 registered Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand out of a total of 3,415,744 registered migrants. As such, migrants from Myanmar represent close to 70 percent of all documented migrants. Ms. Eve, drawing on data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), also shared that since 2023, an estimated 1.5 million Myanmar nationals entered Thailand, with roughly 22,000 people entering Thailand on average per month. IOM estimates that 60 percent of long-term arrivals from Myanmar are undocumented. Ms. Eve explained that it is difficult for migrants to apply for documents because of high costs, complicated procedures, long waiting times, and a lack of cooperation from employers.

In Mae Sot, a border district in Tak Province, migrants are largely employed in the manufacturing (40 percent), agriculture (30 percent), construction (20 percent), and service (10 percent) sectors. This work, Ms. Eve shared, is often characterised as “3D work—difficult, dangerous, and dirty.” Since the coup in Myanmar, YCOWA, a member of MMN, has found that certain labour conditions have worsened for migrants across the district. Firstly, many migrants are not being paid the legal daily minimum wage. For example, prior to the coup, many migrant factory workers earned the minimum wage of THB 345 per day and now they earn between THB 170 and 200. “When workers in factories demand an increase in the daily wage, employers tell them that their country situation is getting worse and they can quit if they don’t want to earn this amount as they can find other workers easily,” Ms. Eve explained. Secondly, many factories in Mae Sot are reducing their labour forces to less than 50 workers to avoid needing to register. The informalisation of workplaces is a method to further exploit workers as employers claim they are “a small business” and “cannot afford to pay the minimum wage.” Ms. Eve expressed that many migrant workers are in a situation of ‘modern slavery’ as they often work from 8am to 11pm with only one day off per month and yet their wages can barely cover their living expenses. One worker declared, “We get poorer while working more.”

In addition, YCOWA has found that in some employment sectors that rely on informal and seasonal workers, such as the agriculture sector, employers are only providing work for four to five days per month, forcing migrants to seek work elsewhere to eke out a living. Furthermore, complex and expensive documentation processes are contributing to higher numbers of undocumented migrants. Without a regular immigration and employment status, migrants lack labour and social protections, including access to Thailand’s social security system, and are subject to arrest and deportation. Ms. Eve described migrant exploitation as being a cycle in which poverty contributes to migrants’ undocumented status, which influences their limited access to labour and social protections and

increased risk of slavery-like conditions and labour rights violations, which in turn perpetuate poverty.

In conclusion, Ms. Eve highlighted some of the work of YCOWA addressing these challenges. In particular, YCOWA provides migrants with legal and humanitarian assistance, works to empower migrants through trainings, organises collective actions and labour groups, and advocates for migrants' rights through campaigns. She also shared four demands made by migrants in Mae Sot: (1) to be paid a living wage; (2) to more easily secure documents at government-set prices; (3) to safely access healthcare without experiencing discrimination; and (4) for all migrants to contribute to and access the social security system regardless of their immigration status.

Discussant 4: Naw Wahkushee, Karen Peace Support Network

The displacement of Karen peoples since the coup

The final discussant of the first panel, Naw Wahkushee of the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), presented on the situation facing Karen people, an ethnic minority group, in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup. To begin, she described how, in the past year, the Karen National Liberation Army and its allies made significant territorial gains in southeastern Myanmar, seizing 70 military camps. These camps were located in Kawthoolei,¹¹ which includes the seven districts of Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton), Taw Oo (Taungoo), Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin), Mergui/Tavoy (Taningtharyi), Mutraw (Papun), Dooplaya, and Hpa-An. The 70 camps represent over half of the total number of camps seized since the February 2021 coup. As such, large sections of the Thai-Myanmar border are now back under Karen control for the first time in 40 years.

According to data from KPSN, across most of the districts in Kawthoolei, the number of SAC air and artillery strikes and resulting casualties have increased during the past year. Between February 2021 and July 2023 (a 30-month period), there were a total of 1,595 air and artillery strikes and 611 casualties, while during only 13 months, between August 2023 and August 2024, there were 984 strikes and 569 casualties. Naw Wahkushee noted how the military's attacks are deliberately targeting community buildings and civilians. Between February 2021 and August 2024, 22 schools, 21 hospitals and clinics, 23 churches, and 31 monasteries were destroyed across the seven districts. The armed conflict has resulted in the significant displacement of Karen people. As of September 2024, there were 1,052,729 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kawthoolei, an increase in 40 percent since the end of 2023.

Naw Wahkushee explained that Karen community-based organisations (CBOs) have over three decades of experience delivering cross-border aid to Karen villagers suffering from forced displacement and food shortages. Specifically, from 1992 to 2020, Karen CBOs along the Thai-Myanmar border assisted 1.7 million people in southeastern Myanmar and distributed over 32 million US Dollars in aid. Shortly after the 2021 coup, Karen CBOs set up emergency teams to respond to the growing conflict and displacement. In Mae Sariang, Thailand, seven CBOs formed the Border Emergency Relief Team to support people in northern parts of Kawthoolei and in Mae Sot, Thailand, 11 CBOs established the Karen Emergency Response Team to aid people across the entire Kawthoolei area. With financial support from international donors, aid is being delivered in coordination with Karen National Union authorities at different administrative levels. Despite these successes, more funding is urgently needed to address an ongoing food crisis among IDPs, which has been exacerbated by heavy flooding across Kawthoolei.

Naw Wahkushee concluded her presentation by reading KPSN's list of recommendations targeting international humanitarian donors, the Thai government, and the international community. Firstly, KPSN calls on international donors: (1) to shift their humanitarian aid strategies and prioritise border-based assistance for IDPs in Kawthoolei; and (2) to provide direct funding, via international

¹¹ Kawthoolei is the name of the state that Karen nationalists have sought to establish in Myanmar since the late 1940s.

non-governmental organisations if necessary, to local CBOs and ethnic resistance organisations so they can deliver emergency humanitarian aid across the border to IDPs in low-profile ways. Secondly, KPSN calls on the Thai government: (1) to allow refugees to stay in Thailand until the situation in their homeland improves and they feel safe to return; (2) to allow humanitarian agencies to access the small number of displaced persons who have crossed into Thailand and are staying in temporary camps; and (3) to allow the referral of patients to Thai hospitals. Lastly, KPSN calls on the international community: (1) to deny legitimacy to the SAC military regime; (2) to suspend all political and financial support to the military regime and impose immediate sanctions on military-owned and controlled companies; (3) to impose a global arms embargo on the regime; (4) to impose sanctions on the supply of aviation fuel to the military regime; (5) to ensure justice and accountability; and (6) to provide political and humanitarian support to the people of Myanmar.

Open discussion

Following the presentations, Ms. Pollock invited members of the audience to ask questions or comment. To start, an audience member inquired about the ethnic composition and politics of migrants from Myanmar, including whether there are hierarchies and whether they are treated similarly or differently in Thailand. Mr. Press responded by explaining that the Myanmar migrant population is ethnically diverse and migrants' geographical locations in Thailand are typically in proximity to their places of origin in Myanmar and reinforced by chain migration. For example, in Chiang Mai, there are many Shan migrants; in Samut Sakhon, many people are Mon; and Karen people generally live and work along the border and in central Thailand. He shared that, in the past, there was some conflict between different ethnic groups in fishing ports, but he was not aware of any recent conflicts. He suggested that "people are more interested in surviving and less interested in the ethnic politics that they left behind." Ms. Eve shared that, in the case of post-coup Mae Sot, "we see people from every state and region. They are all fleeing Myanmar...It is now [ethnically] mixed in Mae Sot. There is no majority group." Also addressing the question, Dr. Khemanitthathai explained that it is easier for Shan migrants to assimilate to Thai society because of linguistic and cultural similarities, and Naw Wahkushee shared that intermarriage between Myanmar Karen and Thai Karen peoples is common and can make adapting to life in Thailand easier.

Another audience member reminded all the participants that what is happening in Myanmar is not independent of Thailand and that Thailand is profiting off the war in Myanmar. "I think Thailand doesn't want to have a clear policy on migrants and refugees because people make money from the lack of clarity," they suggested. In addition, the displacement of people in Myanmar creates opportunities for investment in development projects. They explained that this occurred in the 1990s when millions of Shan people were displaced due to mass logging and plans to construct dams along the Salween River. They asked whether civil society and academics were prepared to grapple with this reality. Dr. Khemanitthathai agreed, stating that "Thailand should be responsible and is a stakeholder in the Myanmar crisis."

One audience member asked about the gendered dynamics of migration and how gender relates to migrants' working conditions and documentation status. Mr. Press shared that some occupations are highly gendered, with domestic work, the garment industry, and the seafood processing industry relying heavily on the labour of migrant women and the fishing industry being dependent upon men. He also shared that migrant women are more likely to be undocumented. Ms. Eve added that, in Mae Sot, most of the workers are women because "employers believe women are easier to exploit so they hire more women." Both Ms. Eve and Naw Wahkushee stressed the importance of considering the needs of women in the work of YCOWA and KPSN, respectively, and acknowledged some of the challenges unique to women migrants and IDPs, including limited access to reproductive healthcare.

Finally, a member of the audience remarked on how Thai society has at least begun to acknowledge that migrants from Myanmar are beneficial for Thai businesses, and asked whether the Thai

government and business sector would invest in training and educating people from Myanmar to bring greater benefits to Thailand in the future. Dr. Khemanitthathai agreed that Thai businesses are dependent upon migrant workers from Myanmar and that this dependence is growing in the context of Thailand's ageing society. She suggested that "we can use this as an opportunity to integrate our Myanmar friends with dignity." Mr. Press added that "the Thai government needs to recognise that migrants can learn Thai, they have skills, and they can integrate into Thai society... They always look at the economic contributions of migrants, but they need to look beyond this."



Audiences and Panelists in the Panel Discussion



Audiences Looking at the Exhibition Boards

PANEL DISCUSSION 2: PRECARIOUS STATUS: THE THAI GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES TO GRANT PERMANENT RESIDENCY AND CITIZENSHIP TO MIGRANTS

Moderator: Mr. Artid Pabun, Advocacy and Research Coordinator, Mekong Migration Network

Mr. Artid Pabun, MMN Advocacy and Research Coordinator and the moderator of the second panel discussion, introduced the session by explaining that, on 29 October 2024, the Thai Cabinet announced its decision to streamline approval processes for granting permanent residency and citizenship to long-term migrants in Thailand and their Thailand-born children. The Office of the National Security Council (NSC) is the key actor facilitating these processes. The latest Cabinet Resolution targets 480,000 people who are living in Thailand as stateless persons. Among them, approximately 340,000 are eligible to apply for permanent residency and 140,000, who were born in Thailand, are eligible to apply for citizenship. Today's speakers, Mr. Pabun shared, are not experts on these regulations, but rather are individuals navigating these processes who have been living with uncertainty as stateless persons in Thailand.

Discussants: Ms. Sommai Jantawong and Mr. Sai Kaw

Impact of the policies concerning permanent residency and citizenship

Ms. Sommai Jantawong began by sharing that she received permanent residency last year and that she plans to apply for Thai citizenship after being a permanent resident for five years. Prior to receiving permanent residency, Ms. Jantawong faced many challenges. For example, she was ineligible to apply for a work permit before the government changed this regulation. She also experienced significant restrictions on her movement. She could not travel outside of the district in which she was registered without permission from the district office, and she could not travel outside of Thailand. To leave the district, she had to apply for a travel permit, which took three to four days, and then she had to report to local authorities upon her return. She shared that she experienced obstacles when the village head person asked for "extra payments under the table" to issue documents. "It was 10,000 to 100,000 Baht. In the past, I didn't have enough money to pay the village head," she stated. Ms. Jantawong expressed that with permanent resident status she now has "both freedom of mobility and more freedom over [her] life."

Ms. Jantawong proceeded to explain the long and complicated process of applying for permanent residency. Some of the many and costly steps included receiving documents from the Immigration Office and local police office and submitting documents to government offices at various administrative levels. This situation was worsened by the fact that some of the government officials she interacted with were unaware of relevant policies and procedures and that she was told her application was lost, "not once but many times." She shared, "I was very tired. Contacting different authorities took a lot of my time. I had to take leave from my work. I was very frustrated."

Mr. Sai Kaw, who is waiting for his permanent residency application to be approved, shared his story of living in Thailand and trying to secure a permanent status. He explained that he migrated from Myanmar's Shan State to Thailand when he was 5 years old. Throughout his life, he has held a highland people's card and identification for non-Thai citizens. In 2015, he applied for permanent residency and, in 2021, he was notified that his application had been lost and he had to restart the process. He submitted his application a second time in early 2022. It has still not yet been approved.

Both Ms. Jantawong and Mr. Sai Kaw warned about having a criminal record when applying for permanent residency or citizenship. Any criminal record, they noted, regardless of how minor the offence is, will prevent an application from being successful. Ms. Jantawong continued the discussion

by expressing her optimism upon learning about the Thai Cabinet's decision to streamline approval processes in October. This hopefulness, however, quickly dissolved upon realising that all processes were stalled as the government office awaited directions. She shared, "I was really happy. We had been waiting for this for more than 10 years...It was finally approved. The implementation will be better, there will be less steps and less paperwork...we had hopes. We asked the central government for an update, and they said no progress had been made. Does this mean everything has stopped, we asked? They said yes, the government has to wait for the next steps. We didn't know what would happen. Will they lose all our documents again?"

Mr. Sai Kaw, who is in the final steps of the application process, was similarly disheartened when everything abruptly stopped in October following the announcement of the new regulation. Reflecting on his life in Thailand and his precarious status, he shared, "I've been here for more than 30 years. This is my home. I grew up here, I went to school here, I speak Thai fluently, yet my status is still temporary. What if they say they're not going to renew this regulation? There's nowhere for me to go. I don't know anyone in Myanmar." The panelists concluded by calling on the Thai Cabinet to review the situation and better understand the realities of those who are endlessly waiting and living lives of uncertainty.

Open discussion

During the open discussion, an audience member remarked on the bureaucratic nature of the application process and the many ways in which corruption can occur. "There are so many ways for the system to be corrupt, so many ways to ask for money under the table," they stated. Mr. Sai Kaw emphasised the lengthy application process, sharing that the NSC estimates that if all 480,000 eligible individuals apply for permanent residency or citizenship, with the current application process it could take upwards of 40 years to approve everyone's status. Another audience member shared their personal experience of applying for permanent residency two years ago. They explained that their application has already been assessed by five government agencies and they asked the panelists whether they should continue to wait or follow up with officials. Mr. Sai Kaw suggested making a list of questions and sending it to the officials for clarification. Ms. Jantawong exclaimed, "We really want this regulation to be implemented as soon as possible." Mr. Sai Kaw agreed, stating, "I hope this regulation will be implemented so that our rights will be protected."



Audiences and Panelists in the Open Discussion

CLOSING REMARKS

Closing remarks by Mr. Brahm Press, Executive Director, MAP Foundation, and Steering Committee Chairperson, Mekong Migration Network

Mr. Brahm Press closed the event by summarising the topics covered over the course of the two panel discussions. Through Dr. Sirada Khemanitthathai's presentation, the audience learned about the multiple crises unfolding in Myanmar that are creating the conditions for mixed migration. Mr. Press, on behalf of MAP Foundation, highlighted the situation facing migrants from Myanmar working in Thailand's agriculture sector, while Ms. Eve from YCOWA presented on the impact of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar on labour conditions in Mae Sot. In addition, Naw Wahkushee from KPSN shared about the situation facing Karen people in Myanmar since the coup, emphasising the impacts of armed conflict on civilians. Finally, Ms. Sommai Jantawong and Mr. Sai Kaw concluded the event by speaking about their experiences and challenges navigating permanent residency and citizenship application processes in Thailand as stateless persons. Mr. Press thanked all the discussants, audience members, organisers, and the funder for making the 2024 IMD event possible.