

BWI Statement on the Death of 54 Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand

The Building and Wood Workers International is greatly alarmed by the plight of the people of Burma, particularly those who have been forced into exile and relocate due to economic and political reason.

Since 1962 the people of Burma have been under a strict military dictatorship that has systematically persecuted all forms of democratic opposition, pushed thousands of Burmese to desperate poverty, and forced over a million to relocate to nearby Thailand and other countries throughout Southeast Asia. Because of their desperate situation, thousands of Burmese choose to leave Burma without any official papers thus leaving them susceptible for exploitation, arrest, detainment, and deportation. The recent death of 54 Burmese on April 10, 2008 in Rangong Province, Thailand is a tragic example of the unfortunate fate of the people of Burma.

According to public accounts, the Burmese were being transported in a refrigerated truck from Victoria Point, Burma to the resort island of Phuket. While traveling through Ranong province, 54 Burmese including two children suffocated due to lack of ventilation in the truck. Of the 47 Burmese who survived, 14 are children who have been separated from the group to be deported back to Burma. The rest were jailed for three days for failing to pay a fine of \$US 31 and they currently are awaiting deportation. It should be noted that this is not an isolated case. In the past two years, at least 109 migrant workers have died, 149 have been injured, and 19 are missing.

The BWI is alarmed by the circumstances which have forced the Burmese people to take dangerous avenues to leave their homes to seek a better life for themselves and their families. The BWI is also deeply outraged by the failure of the Royal Thai government to protect the Burmese people, particularly since they are instrumental in fueling the Thai economy. Although Thailand is a sending country in the world of migrant and cross border work, it is also a receiving country. The Burmese along with other migrant workers from Laos, and Cambodia work in the typical "3D---dirty, demeaning, and dangerous---Jobs" in the agricultural, construction, seafood, and garment industries.

In the same way that the Royal Thai government is concerned about the working conditions of its nationals who have chose to work abroad, BWI believes that the Royal Thai government must ensure that the working and living conditions of migrant workers are humane, safe, and decent. Instead, of implementing a policy to protect those who have been forced to enter Thai borders, the Royal Thai government has chosen to punish migrant workers, as evident by the decrees that have been issued in Ranong, Rayong, and Pang Nga provinces. According to these decrees, it is basically illegal for migrant workers to go out at night, carry mobile phone, and ride motorbikes. BWI believes that these decrees are a clear violation of human rights.

As a memory to those who tragically lost their lives on April 10th as well as hundreds of more migrant workers who perished in crossing Thai borders, we at BWI call for the following:

1. The Royal Thai government to initiate a fair and just migration policy that recognizes labor and human rights of all migrant workers;
2. The Royal Thai government to cease criminalization of undocumented migrant workers;
3. The migrant workers who survived the tragedy in Ranong province be given proper medial attention, counseling, and legal assistance rather than detention and forced deportation;
4. Compensation to the families of the migrant workers who perished on April 10th; and
5. The authorities to launch an independent inquiry into the deaths of April 10th so that the tragedy is not repeated.