Date : 29 March 2018

BURMESE MIGRANTS REPORT DISCRIMINATION IN CITIZENSHIP VERIFICATION PROCESS

Thailand – As an estimated 1 million remaining migrant workers in Thailand rush to verify their citizenship before a looming March 31 deadline, Burmese nationals of South Asian descent widely report subjection to extra scrutiny in order to prove their ties to their homeland.

The end of the month marks the date in which Thailand aims to have all of its nearly 4 million migrant workers registered. The process to do so accelerated in early February with the opening of 80 One Stop Service (OSS) Center by the Ministry of Labour. Here, migrant workers must first obtain a Certificate of Identity (CI), or a confirmation of their nationality from immigration officials from their home country in this case, Burma before undergoing a health check and later applying for a work permit. Protocol requires that to obtain a CI, migrant workers must present officials with a letter of employment from their boss, proof of their residence in Thailand, and their temporary migrant worker identification card.

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) has learned that Burmese Muslims, as well as Hindu and Buddhist Burma-born Gurkhas of Nepali ancestry, are being required to prove their citizenship by presenting additional documents in order to get a CI. These can include a current Burmese ID card, household registration in Burma, and letters from both the local police and the section chairperson of their hometowns verifying their ties to the community.

Only those who have the funds to travel back to Burma and the necessary connections and resources in the country — are able to get the papers they are allowed under the country's tiered citizenship law, which is implemented around ethnicity and excludes many those of South Asian descent from full citizen status. These documents are then further scrutinised at OSS centers in Thailand, without guarantee of acceptance.

"Others don't have to do this. It makes me feel small," one Muslim migrant worker from southeastern Burma said after returning to his village and procuring the additional documents after being initially turned away and having his ties to the country questioned. "We just want equal rights," he added.

"Immigration officials accuse us of not being citizens of Burma," explained one member of Burma's Gurkha community who now lives and works in Thailand. "Here, I feel like I became a kalar," he said of the way he was treated, referring to a derogatory Burmese term for people of South Asian descent used to imply foreignness.
A Burmese Muslim man assisting others in applying for the CI told BHRN that the migrant documentation process "is always more difficult if you are Muslim," and suggested that the associated costs with the process were much higher for members of this community.

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"The uncertainty created by this type of exclusion is very worrying. What happens to those who are unable to provide the extra documents needed to satisfy the authorities? How can they remain safely in Thailand and what are the long-term implications for their citizenship status in Burma?" asked BHRN executive director Kyaw Win. "This pattern of behaviour contributes to greater insecurity among communities that are already marginalised," he said.

It should also be noted that BHRN staff witnessed particularly disturbing conditions on the ground at one OSS center this week. Hundreds of ethnic Shan, Karen, Ta'ang, Burmans and Muslims were seen sleeping in tents, on mats, and on pieces of cardboard, waiting for their queue numbers to be called, some for more than two days. Garbage covered the area, and neither drinking water nor toilet access was provided free of charge. Those waiting — in temperatures that reached 36 degrees Celsius — included nursing mothers as well as children. At least one individual was seen passing out under the conditions.

Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)
Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

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