



RESILIENCE & UNCERTAINTY

MEKONG MIGRANT WORKERS AMID THE PANDEMIC DOWNTURN



Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

We wish to express special thanks to all of the migrants who so generously gave their time to participate in this project, and share with us their stories.

Pseudonyms have been used in the text to protect migrants' identities.



Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), founded in 2003, is a subregional network of migrant support NGOs, migrant grassroots groups and research institutes. The central goal of MMN is to promote the welfare, well-being, dignity and human rights (especially labour, women's and family rights) of migrants in the GMS, and to build mutual support and solidarity among migrants and advocates within the GMS. To achieve this goal, MMN jointly carries out research, advocacy, capacity building and networking.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand is home to more than 4 million migrant workers, most of whom hail from Myanmar, Cambodia and, to a lesser extent, Laos. They are employed across a wide range of sectors, including construction, agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, fishing, seafood processing, and the service sector. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of migrant workers in Thailand has become increasingly precarious. With the global reach of the pandemic disrupting supply chains and necessitating the closure of national borders, migrant workers employed in tourism and export-orientated manufacturing industries have been especially hard hit by the economic downturn. Migrant workers employed in other sectors have also had their wages and working hours cut and are currently facing a prolonged period of uncertainty.

While the impact of COVID-19 is felt across the world, the nuances of the specific challenges faced by migrant workers in Thailand remain unfamiliar to most. In order to amplify their voices and raise awareness, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN), a sub-regional network of civil society organisations (CSOs) working to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), has initiated a visual storytelling project. It is our hope that the project will provide migrants an opportunity to tell their stories in their own words, and bring their challenges and resilience into the limelight. From an advocacy standpoint, MMN hopes that these stories will serve as a means of illustrating how the complex legal and policy landscape surrounding migration and social protection impacts the daily lives of migrants, highlighting both existing problems and possible solutions.

This booklet introduces the stories told by migrants, along with dynamic images by documentary photographer, John Hulme. Additional photographs captured by John Hulme for this project will be displayed at a photographic exhibition hosted by SEA-Junction at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre in December 2020, with more exhibitions elsewhere planned for 2021. Stories and photographs will also be displayed on the MMN website.

In addition to our visual story telling project, MMN has conducted in-depth research focusing on migrant decision-making during the pandemic. For more information on this forthcoming publication, please visit MMN's homepage (www.mekongmigration.org).



U KHIN OHN

A 65 year old man who is the only earner in his family. He brings home 1,500 Thai baht (50 USD) a month from his security job along with additional income from his construction job, which has been reduced to only 7-10 days per month with a daily wage of 150-200 baht (5-6.67 USD). His earnings are not enough for a whole family to buy food, along with medicine for his wife who has diabetes and cannot work. His daughter used to live with them in Mae Sot but has been unable to return from Myanmar due to the border closure. He is an unregistered migrant and is very worried about the possibility of being arrested.

U Khin Ohn is a 65-year-old man who is the only person earning for his family since the COVID-19 outbreak. Prior to the pandemic, he lived with his wife and daughter in Mae Sot District, Tak Province, however his daughter is currently stuck in Myanmar and has been unable to cross the border to return to work in Thailand.. His wife has diabetes and cannot work, and local movement restrictions due to the pandemic are currently preventing her from accessing her regular treatment at the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot. U Khin Ohn therefore has to purchase his wife’s medicine from a nearby drugstore instead. He has worked the night shift as a security guard for 14 years, earning 1,500 baht (50 USD) per month alongside a construction job during the daytime at 150 – 200 baht (5-6.67 USD) per day. COVID-19 caused his work at the construction site to be reduced to just 7 – 10 days per month. His income is inadequate to pay for food and his wife’s medications, and he has had to borrow money from friends and to purchase goods on credit from trusted stores. U Khin Ohn has never been registered as a regular migrant, and has not received any government assistance or social security benefits. Recently, the police have been arresting undocumented migrant workers, which has caused U Khin Ohn to further restrict his movement. “It would be good if we could get government supports or if someone would bring us rice and food. There has not been any food distribution in such a long time”, he said.



KHIN SAN WIN

A mother whose family income has been reduced to only 2,000 baht (66.67 USD) per month, as her husband and son cannot travel to work in chili and corn fields in other villages due to restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. She is very stressed because they do not have enough money to cover their daily food expenses for their family of five people. Her Certificate of Identity card has expired and she does not have enough money to pay for an extension.

Khin San Win lives with her husband and her three children in Phob Phra District, Tak Province. Her husband and one of her sons are the main income providers for the family, working on corn and chili farms. Khin San Win is mainly responsible for household work but sometimes also works on the farm. When she works, she receives 150 baht (5 USD) per day as wages (while men workers' wages are 200 baht (6.67 USD) per day). Since the COVID-19 outbreak, her husband and son have been limited in the number of farms they can work for, resulting in their family income dropping from 6,000 baht (200 USD) per month to 2,000 baht (66.67 USD) per month. This amount does not even cover food for the family of five. **"We feel so stressed as the breadwinners to try to earn enough money for day-to-day food expenses. But on the other hand, we also fear getting COVID-19 by travelling outside the community, as the community leader announced that if they find that anyone has been exposed to the virus they will close the community. We feel anxious at the idea of another lockdown, as how can we survive if we are unable to go outside the community for work?"** said Khin San Win. In addition, her work permit has already expired **"My Certificate of Identity has already expired and I cannot afford to renew it because it is too expensive. I recently resorted to obtaining a so-called "police card" which costs 250 baht (8.33 USD) per person per month (to provide protection from arrest) because police have been arresting undocumented workers even when we are just in our house. During the outbreak in June, police cracked down and arrested 13 undocumented workers, including children. My family was among them and we were charged 2,000 baht (66.67 USD) per person for release. We insisted that we couldn't pay 2,000 baht each because it was too much. Finally, we were released by paying 800 baht each which our employer covered. We will have to pay the employer back later."**



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KHIN THIDA OO

A woman who has been blacklisted by employers and has not been able to find a new job since August 2019 due to her role as a leader in filing a case against her employer. Currently, she is waiting to receive all compensation that she is owed, which is due to be paid by January 2021. After that, she will go back to Myanmar.

Khin Thida Oo used to work in a garment factory in Mae Sot District, Tak Province. However, she has been jobless since August 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic) because her employer put her name and picture on a blacklist informing other factories not to employ her due to her leading role in lodging a complaint. The complaint she made was that her employer attempted to force her and around 150 colleagues working in the same factory to sign a document certifying that they were receiving the daily minimum wage of 315 baht, when in reality they received only 120-150 baht (4-5 USD) per day. Khin Thida Oo and her friends declined to sign the document. Shortly after, collective bargaining for improvements to working conditions took place with the employer at the labour protection office. An agreement was made but the employer did not honour the agreement. Khin Thida Oo and other workers' leaders therefore filed a case at the labour court, which they won. The employer has been ordered to pay the workers all unpaid wages in installments which must be completed by January 2021. Khin Thida Oo has planned that after she has received all compensation she will go back home to Myanmar. Since she lost her job and could not find another, she has had to rely on her younger sister, who is also working in Mae Sot, for both accommodation and food. Sometimes she tries to pick vegetables growing in public areas for cooking. During the lockdown period she received some donated rice and dried food from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs), which was very helpful but not sufficient. She has managed to obtain a small amount of income in the form of per-diems from trainings she has attended, and she also helped as an assistant to a paralegal officer and lawyer who provided legal aid to migrant workers. To improve working and living conditions for migrant workers both during the pandemic and in general, Khin Thida Oo suggests strongly that, **“I really want migrants’ voices to be heard. Both Myanmar and Thai governments should cooperate to make sure that all migrant workers receive no less than the minimum wage, and to distribute information regarding registration and COVID-19, making sure that migrants can truly access it. All workers want to be registered and to access social protection, no migrant wants to get in trouble. I want governments to understand migrant workers and have sympathy for them.”**



KHAING KHAING TUN

Head Mistress and founder of White School Learning Center in Phob Phra District, Tak Province, who is currently fighting hard for migrant children in agricultural areas to access education. However, a lack of funds and debt accrued for the centre are now threatening the centre's survival.

Khaing Khaing Tun migrated to work in Thailand in search of a better life in 2009. She works as a volunteer for Foundation for Education and Development (FED) in Mae Sot District, Tak Province, and teaches the children of migrants. Upon discovering the poor living conditions of many children who live with their migrant parents in agricultural areas and the fact that most do not go to school, she opened an educational facility called 'White School Learning Center'. **"I will do my best to give migrants' children access to education to better their lives"**, she said. In order to fund the school administration, including a salary of 2,500 baht (83.33 USD) for seven teachers, Khaing Khaing Tun raises money by selling desserts that teachers, parents, and students help to bake, as well as from her own income earned by teaching Burmese language. Currently, there are 106 students at the centre, and their parents are mostly working in agricultural jobs as seasonal workers, getting paid daily and often lower than the minimum wage. The parents of the students generally do not have any savings, and often borrow money for daily expenses during the off-season, leading some to be constantly in debt. **"Though the school fee is only 150 baht (5 USD) per student per year, half of the parents cannot afford to pay it"**, she said. Due to COVID-19, the school had to close following the government order. However, after the order was lifted, it still could not re-open because it was unable to follow the health protection standards set by the government. She asked permission from the Thai village headman in her district to use the village meeting room as a temporary school, and got approval. The school reopened on 3 November 2020 with help for prevention covid-19 from local sub-district hospital and NGOs. At present, Khaing Khaing Tun is in debt due to having borrowed money for school expenses to ensure that the classes can continually run. Though she put much effort into applying for funding, she hasn't had much success on this front. She said, **"If we are really unable to manage this school and it needs to be closed, we have to accept it was because we had no other choices."** **"The Thai and Myanmar governments should provide financial support for migrants' schooling, and the Thai government should recognise degrees obtained from migrant schools (such as the White School Learning Center). Students who have graduated from migrant schools would then be able to study in higher education institutions, such as high schools or universities."**



MA PHYU

A single mom from Myanmar who migrated to Phob Phra, Tak Province, with her 4 children just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Thailand. Taking care of a daughter with polio leaves her with limited time for working in a chili warehouse, and she currently earns only 50 baht (1.67 USD) a day.

Ma Phyu is a single mom of four children whose husband died when her youngest child was just 6 months old. Ma Phyu and her children crossed the border into Thailand in hope of working to save enough money to enable them to eventually return home to a better life and more stability. She was employed to cut chilies at a warehouse in Phob Phra District, Tak Province. In early 2020, she was paid about 140 baht (4.67 USD) per day which was just enough for the daily expenses of the five members of her family. During COVID-19, there has been less work and she now earns only 40 – 50 baht (1.33-1.67 USD) per day, and some days has no work at all. She found a night shift job, but was unable to take it because she did not want to leave her children alone. Ma Phyu's second child, who is now 13 years old, was born with polio. Her other children help take care of her while Ma Phyu goes to work, however Ma Phyu still has to come back home to feed her daughter, as she does not accept this care from other family members. Ma Phyu is therefore unable to take any job that is too far from her home. "If there was a childcare centre in the workplace, it would help women to bring their children with them to work, and they would be able to concentrate on their work more, enabling them to earn more income" she said. Ma Phyu is willing to take care of her children as much as she can, especially the one with polio as she is a girl and Ma Phyu worries she may not be safe if she stays alone. Ma Phyu receives eggs and rice every 15 days which helps a lot, but she still owes money to her relatives that she borrowed for daily expenses. Her 7 and 10-year-old sons are studying at White School Learning Center which is not too far from her home. Ma Phyu plans to stay in Thailand for another three years, although she recently became undocumented.



STORIES FROM **CHIANG MAI****MOE MOE**

A construction worker who, along with her husband, lost her job because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have a baby with cleft lip and cleft palate who will need five different surgeries before he is 20 years old.

Moe Moe and her husband are migrant workers from Myanmar working in the construction industry in Chiang Mai Province. They have recently become unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic: **“Now we face a lot of trouble, no documents, and no job”**, Moe Moe said. Her husband had not worked for 15 days at the time of this interview. Moe Moe gave birth to a son in Thailand this year but her baby was born with a cleft lip and cleft palate. **“My baby has to be treated through surgery at least 5 times before he reaches the age of 20 years old”** she said. Moe Moe’s baby just has the first of these surgical repairs in October 2020 with the costs supported by Maharaj Nakhon Chiang Mai Hospital and some contributions from Grace Church. Moe Moe and her husband sometimes receive food distributions and other supplies such as rice, eggs, cooking oils, and face masks from Grace Church and MAP Foundation, although it’s still not enough, and they have had to borrow money from a friend who lives in the same community. **“Both Thai and Burmese governments should help people to get jobs because we would have money to take care of ourselves if we could work, and would not have to rely on help and support all the time,”** Moe Moe shared. Moe Moe does not plan to return to Myanmar because she wants her child to complete his treatment in Thailand.



AYE

A Shan hotel cleaner in Chiang Mai and a single mother of three children. The COVID-19 pandemic led to her work being reduced by 50 percent. This has resulted in much stress and even suicidal thoughts, as she has to struggle to earn enough to cover daily expenses and for her children to go school.

Aye is a Shan migrant workers and single parent of three children who are studying in primary and secondary school. Aye works as cleaner at a hotel in Chiang Mai Province. The spread of COVID-19 caused a drastic decline in the number of hotel guests, which resulted in some workers being laid off and reduced working hours of those who still remain employed. For the past three months, Aye has worked only 15 days per month, earning 320 baht (10.67 USD) per day, which is not enough for her family. Prior to having her hours reduced, Aye used to earn about 9,000 baht (300 USD) per month. She is trying to find other jobs and sometimes gets construction or cleaning work: **“(There are) more workers than jobs, and employers are hiring Thai people first”**, she said. Aye received food distributions and other supplies such as rice, eggs, cooking oils, and face masks from MAP Foundation a couple of times: **“This support may not have much value for some people, but it is very valuable for us, especially the rice. On the days when we had nothing to eat, when we received donated rice we were so happy that it made me shed tears of joy”**, she said. When she needed to find money to support her children’s study, Aye decided to borrow money through an informal lending system at an interest rate of 10 percent per month, which spiraled into a debt of more than 50,000 baht (1,667 USD). **“I feel very frustrated and disheartened and sometimes I cry. I put water in a bucket and scream into the water when I feel so stressed. I used to think about committing suicide but I changed my mind when looking at my children. They are my encouragement to keep fighting. I’m willing to support my children’s education as high as I can and I hope being educated will help them find a better job”**, she said. Aye migrated to Thailand as a 7-year-old. She can speak and read Thai but not the Burmese language. Aye feels she belongs here and does not think about returning to Myanmar. She wants to have a right to vote, so that she can vote for a good leader who will improve the country’s economy. **“Any support mechanisms in Thailand should also be provided to migrant workers, as they are also affected by the crisis of COVID-19 as well”**, she shared.



SUTEE

A Cambodian Construction worker in Chiang Mai who migrated to Thailand with the hope of earning enough money to build a house back home. However, his oldest child suffered an accident, falling into a well on construction site, and needed expensive medical treatment. His wife also just gave birth to a new baby, and her work permit needed to be extended. All of these expenses coincided with losing work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He is therefore in debt by more than 50,000 baht (1,667 USD). Nonetheless, he still keeps hope.

Sutee is a Cambodian migrant construction worker in Chiang Mai Province. Sutee lives in a construction camp with his wife and two children. His wife just delivered a baby 15 days ago, and he wishes she could stay in a better place than their current room which is made of zinc and gets very hot in the daytime, but they have no options. **“We have no choices, we only need to be patient and keep fighting”**, he said. The construction site he works on used to hire more than 100 workers, but now only 30 workers remain due to a lack of work during COVID-19. During the lockdown, Sutee and his friends could not work and did not earn any wages for two months. Sutee had to borrow money from his foreman and buy food and supplies on a credit system from a mobile shop. He received food distributions and face masks from Grace Church which helped some, but still was not enough. Unfortunately, his two year-old child fell into a well on the construction site and he had to borrow 20,000 baht (667 USD) to pay for his child’s treatment. Following this, together with the cost of the delivery of his new baby, and registration fees for Sutee and his wife amounting to 12,000 baht (400 USD) each, he is in debt by more than 60,000 baht. Even though Sutee recently returned to work, last month he worked only 15 days at a rate of 300 baht (10 USD) per day. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, he has been unable to send money to his parents in Cambodia to pay for the bank loan he took out to build a new house. Sutee’s dream is to save money and return to Cambodia to build his own house, and buy car and power tools to work and get income for his family. But for now, he remains in Thailand where, after all their hard work to complete the beautiful building they have constructed, Sutee and his colleagues are not even permitted to walk past the building, as the owner deems their shabby appearance to be off-putting to the building’s occupants. They are therefore forced to take less convenient routes to do their daily shopping and errands. Sutee and his colleagues will soon have to move to another construction site. His family will move together yet again, but they remain hopeful that their dream will come true someday.



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THE EVENT AT WAT PA PAO

Early on the morning of 22 November 2020, Shan people dressed up in traditional outfits and gathered at Wat Pa Pao, which is an important place for Shan migrant workers in Chiang Mai. Inside the Wat, there is an information board detailing Shan history, and Wat Pa Pao Learning Center provides primary education up to grade 6, accredited by the Office of Basic Education Commission. At this event, there were activities throughout the whole day, right up until nighttime. In the morning, there was a merit making ceremony for Shan ancestors both in the form of donations and items which were held in the temple for the first time. Krue Soon, from the “Metta Group” committee, said that this event was the result of collective organisation and the gathering of donations, such as money, food, and other supplies, to be distributed to people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some people brought recipes for Shan noodles and helped cook them for people who joined the event. During lockdown, Metta Group raised money, food, and supplies which they distributed to a number of communities both inside and outside of Chiang Mai Province, including Muang, Chiang Dao, Mae Rim, Piang Luang, Vieng Hang, Fang, and Doi Loe districts in Chiang Mai, Ban Hong District in Lamphun Province, and some areas in Mae Hong Son Province. From March to May, the group made distributions every week by coordinating with temples in each area, and would give to all those who lined up to seek support, whether they were migrant workers or Thai nationals. The group continues to provide food and supplies to those in need. The afternoon activity at the event in November was a lecture on traffic laws and registration and renewal of work permit procedures, delivered by an immigration officer. The event ended with activities about Buddhism at night. The enthusiasm and smiles on the faces of event attendees were signs of the level of unity among Shan migrant workers and their willingness to help each other. The event also provided a space for Shan migrants to happily express their own cultural identity. Wat Pa Pao is a crucial centre for Shan people, both as a physical and spiritual space.



THE WEDDING AT GRACE CHURCH

On the morning of 21 November 2020, after lockdown was lifted - which had affected many migrant workers - Grace Church in Chiang Mai Province welcomed about 150 wedding guests who dressed up in colourful or traditional outfits to attend a ceremony between Wye Lyue Moe, a Kachin woman, and Kiang Ngin Muang, a Chin man. It was a time of celebration and sharing of happiness among people from the same community. This church is an important centre for migrant workers in Chiang Mai, along with Seed Christian School for migrant children, which is located in the same area. At the event on this day, the groom, bride, and some guests wore dresses perfectly stitched by a Myanmar migrant worker who learned sewing from BEAM Foundation. Decorative flowers and foods were also created and prepared by church members. **“Here, we can organise an event even though we do not have much money because the church and members help each other such as by providing food, cooking, buying and decorating flowers, buying cake and so on”** one church member said. Since the COVID-19 outbreak began, this church has collected rice, food, other supplies, and COVID-19 protection materials, which they have distributed to migrant workers: **“(The church) does not only provide spiritual support, but also gives us love and help in various ways. This place is like home”** another church member said.



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YU KYI

A 52-year-old man from Myanmar with a disability affecting his leg. He works to make plates, spoons and forks, as well as art pieces from sea shells. He has experienced a loss of income for a period of four months due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism, as he no longer has buyers for the souvenirs he makes. He applied to receive unemployment benefits from the Social Security Fund, which he has been paying contributions to, but his claim was denied. His family relies on his wife's income which is only enough for their food and monthly water fee of 100 baht (3.33 USD). Fortunately his employer is providing them with free accommodation.

Yu Kyi is a 52-year-old man from Myanmar with a leg disability that was caused by falling on a charcoal fire when he was 14 years old. He cannot work a job that requires a lot of physical movement, therefore making plates, spoons and forks, as well as art pieces from sea shells, is the only source of income that he has. **“This job is the most suitable for me as I can sit in front of the machine. Before COVID-19, I could earn about 400 to 500 baht (13.33-16.67 USD) per day but now I have had no job for four months already”**. He has been in Thailand for 19 years, and lives with his wife and two children. Their children attend a Thai public school. He paid contributions into the social security system and therefore applied to receive unemployment benefits. However, his claim was denied, citing the reason that his occupation does not fall under the coverage of the Social Security Fund. After his friend was requested to pay 6,000 baht (200 USD) for a reference letter from the Myanmar Embassy for the extension of his work permit, Yu Kyi has been put off the idea of requesting any assistance from the embassy. Now his family relies just on the income from his wife who still has job in a hotel. His employer also provides the family with free accommodation and has not called on them to pay the electricity bill for the last two months. His wife's salary is just enough for food and their monthly water fee of 100 baht (3.33 USD).



SHIN NAUNG

A mother aged 24 years from Myanmar who has two young daughters. Her mother lives with her and her husband to help take care of the children. Her husband is the only one in the family who has job and can earn income. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, his work at a seafood cold storage facility has been reduced to 14 days per month and his salary has gone from 9,000 baht (300 USD) to 5,000 baht (167 USD). They therefore borrowed money at a monthly interest rate of 20 percent, and they are struggling with the debt. They have been on a waiting list with the Myanmar Embassy for repatriation assistance since July 2020.

Shin Naung is a 24-year-old mother from Myanmar who has two daughters. The oldest is two years old, and the second child was born in February 2020. Shing Naung's mother came to live with them in Thailand to help take care of the children. Shin Naung does not work and her husband is the only one in a family who has a job and can earn income. He is working in a seafood cold storage facility and gets paid 300 baht (10 USD) a day plus overtime wages of 25 baht (0.83 USD) per hour. His monthly salary was 9,000 baht (300 USD), but after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, his job was reduced to 14 days per month and his salary fell to 5,000 baht (167 USD). The family's monthly expenses for rent, electricity, and water come to around 4,000 baht (133 USD), plus the cost of food for five people. One income is not enough, therefore they borrowed money from an informal lender with a monthly interest rate of 20 percent. As a result, they are now in debt by 10,000 baht (333.33 USD) and do not have money to pay back the principle, they are just paying the monthly interest. Shin Naung really wants to bring her two daughters and mother back home as soon as possible. They applied to the Myanmar Embassy for repatriation assistance in July 2020, but unfortunately her mobile phone later broke and the embassy could not reach them for months. They recently received assistance from a community-based organisation to contact the labour attaché office in Ranong and they now are waiting for a response from the Myanmar Embassy by the end of December 2020. **"I want to go back as soon as possible. Otherwise, the longer we stay here, the more we are in debt. Even if we go back, we will have to borrow more money for the cost of quarantine and transportation".** Her husband will continue working in Thailand to finish paying back the debt and hopes the economy will get better as then he would be able to earn enough to send money home. Shin Naung ended by sharing that **"The embassy process is very helpful for us. But it would be better if the process was much faster than this."**



You are my best

NYO MA

A 31-year-old woman from Myanmar who worked as a ferry boat driver between Myanmar and Thailand with her husband. They both suddenly lost their jobs when the international border closed in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to support themselves and their son, they have accrued a large amount of debt, and the stress of their situation is overwhelming.

Nyo Ma is a 31-year-old woman from Myanmar. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nyo Ma and her husband were working as ferry boat drivers along the route between Ranong, Thailand, and Kaw Taung, Myanmar, earning 800-1,000 baht (26.67-33.33 USD) per day. However, when the pandemic led to the closure of the Thai-Myanmar border in March 2020, they both lost their jobs suddenly. They could no longer send money to their parents in Myanmar, which was usually 6,000 baht (200 USD) before the pandemic. Their son has also been stuck with them since the border closed, and he has neither been able to go back to continue studying in Rangoon nor to attend a school in Thailand. **“When the border closed down, we suddenly had no income at all. That made me mentally break down. I went to the ocean and cried and shouted out loud. I even wanted to jump into the water to commit suicide. But thinking about my son made me keep going on”** Nyo Ma said. Now she is running a small shop which sells goods from Myanmar in Paknam Market, but she can only earn about 200-300 baht (6.67-10 USD) a day. Her family’s main expenses are food, rent and electricity, which come to around 2,000 baht (66.67 USD). They are 40,000 baht (1,333.33 USD) in debt and are paying a monthly interest rate of 15 percent. She is very stressed and said, **“I often shout out loud at the ocean or turn on the music very loud in the house and I cry. This is how I release my stress. I have decided to go back to Myanmar as soon as the border is open. I cannot stand it anymore.”**



STORIES FROM PHANG-NGA

THIDA CHO

A 60 year-old grandmother who works at Tablau Pier, Phang Nga, selecting fish, grating fish meat, and making dried fish. She is the head of a family of six people, however her income was reduced by 50 percent after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. She believes migrants need better access to information and services, and has become active as a community volunteer for migrant communities' rights and health, including prevention of COVID-19.

Thida Cho is a grandmother aged 60 years, who works as fish selector at a fishery pier in Tai Muang District, Phang Nga Province. She also does extra work grating fish meat and making dried fish. After the COVID-19 pandemic began, her employer stopped receiving orders for fish and her regular customers were not able to travel to buy her dried fish due to the lockdown policy. Her income therefore dropped by 50 percent and she now has to rely on just her salary from fish selecting, which is 6,000 baht (200 USD) per month. Her expenses have also increased, as her family had to move out of the free accommodation that was previously provided by her employer and now has to rent a new room. She is the head of her household, which is comprised of six people in total, including her children and grandchildren. Her family is trying to save money by cooking only with fish provided for free by her employer, and no longer buying pork or chicken as they did before. She also shares fish with workers in a nearby rubber plantation who are in trouble and lacking food. She said that she does not want to go back Myanmar because if people there become infected with COVID-19, they don't receive treatment if they don't have the money to pay for it. But in Thailand, treatment is provided for everybody, regardless of nationality. She also shared her belief that Thai people can access a lot of information and services related to COVID-19 and she wants migrant communities to have access to the same services and assistance from the government, too. She explained that she is happy to be here because she is working as a community volunteer on rights and health, which enables her to distribute useful and needed information, including on the prevention of COVID-19, to migrants in her community.



โครงการไทย
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HEIN THU AUNG

A young Myanmar migrant worker who used to work as a waiter at a hotel in tourist area, Khaolak, Phang Nga. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the hotel to close down. He received unemployment benefit from the Social Security Fund but the amount was only just enough to survive. He has now got work on a construction site but it is only 10 days per month, bringing in a monthly income of 3,000 baht (100 USD), which is not enough for food. He really wants to go back Myanmar but he has no money to pay for the cost of the journey.

Hein Thu Aung is a young man aged 25 years from a farming family from Bagan, Myanmar. He has six siblings. He made the decision to migrate to Thailand with a dream of working to earn enough money to invest in a supermarket in his home town. He started his migrant worker life as a cleaner, then a vendor, and his most recent job was a waiter at a restaurant in a hotel in tourist area, Khaolak, Phang Nga Province. But the COVID-19 pandemic caused the hotel to close down back in April 2020. He received unemployment benefits of 5,000 baht (167 USD) a month for 6 months from April to September 2020. Before the pandemic he earned 12,000 baht (400 USD) per month but after losing his job he searched for work and found a job on a construction site earning a daily wage of 300 baht (10 USD) a day. However, Hein Thu Aung only gets 9-10 days of work per month, resulting in a monthly income of 3,000 baht (100 USD), which is not enough for food. He does not have money to pay for a room so he moved to stay with a friend in accommodation provided for free by his friend's employer. He received some rice, instant noodles, canned fish, and toiletries such as soap and toothpaste, masks and alcohol hand gel distributed by FED a few times. Each distribution helped him to save money for approximately 10 days. He really wants to go back home to Myanmar but he does not have enough money to cover the costs of the necessary documents and transportation. He expects the trip would cost 300,000 kyat (227 USD). Hein Thu Aung said, **"I want the Myanmar government or the Myanmar Embassy to come to visit us, the migrants from their country, and help those who want to go back home to be able to do so for free."** He added, **"During the current COVID-19 pandemic, I want the Thai government to reduce the fees for extensions of work permits and visas. If migrant workers can register for free it would be very good"**. Hein Thu Aung will travel back home as soon as he can. If the situation gets better, he wants to come back to work in Thailand again in the future in order to earn enough to fund investments in his homeland. He is still keeping this dream alive and hopes to make it come true someday.



SOE LWIN

A migrant oil palm fruit cutting worker whose job has been reduced by 50 percent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. His employers have received fewer orders and there is an oversupply of workers, with Thai workers generally given preference before migrant workers. His wife's job was also reduced by half. He is worried about having to pay the fee for the extension of his work permit and wants the Thai government to grant an amnesty on the extension of expired work permits until the impact of COVID-19 has subsided.

Soe Lwin is a Myanmar migrant worker who came to Thailand 23 years ago, and has been working on oil palm plantations for 18 years. He lives with his wife and two children on a plantation in Takuapa District, Phang Nga Province. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, his employers have received fewer orders for palm fruit. Plus right now it is currently the low season on the plantation, so not as many workers are needed. Employers also tend to employ Thai workers before migrants, so Soe Lwin's job of cutting palm fruits has been heavily reduced. He gets paid 0.60-0.80 baht (0.02-0.03 USD) per kilogram of fruit picked. Before the pandemic he usually worked 20-25 days per month and received an average wage of 400 baht (13.33 USD) per day, or a monthly average income of around 8,000 baht (267 USD). But now his job has been cut back to only 16-17 days a month at an average rate of 200 baht (6.67 USD) per day, or around 6,000 baht (200 USD) per month. His wife's job at a bungalow has also been reduced to work only every other day and her salary has dropped from 8,000 baht (267 USD) to 5,000 baht (167 USD) per month. Soe Lwin knows other migrants who were laid off from hotel jobs, and friends in the community try to help by sharing their jobs on oil palm plantations with them. He and his wife and son will have to extend their work permits soon and it will cost at least 35,000 baht (1,167 USD). He is planning to try to negotiate with a broker to pay for it in installments. He said, "We want the Myanmar government to negotiate with the Thai government to grant an amnesty to migrants with expired documents until the impact of COVID-19 has subsided". He added, "I thought about going back home to Myanmar but I changed my mind because there we would need to pay for quarantine. The border is still closed and the COVID-19 pandemic there is much worse than in Thailand."



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