

Pity the Burmese Tsunami

Burma escaped the worst ravages of the Tsunami that devastated other countries in the Indian Ocean, but Burmese migrant workers along Thailand's western seaboard have fared poorly

By *Aung Lwin Oo/Phang Nga*

“At first, the water level dropped,” said Kyaw Myint (not his real name), a Burmese fisherman. “But, I heard later from a distance [others] shouting waves coming.” He was working on a trawler based in Phang Nga Province until December 26. Kyaw Myint said he saw other fishing boats washed away by the tsunami. Most of the crew members on Thai-registered trawlers working out of Ranong and Phang Nga Provinces are Burmese.

Although Burma escaped the worst of the tsunami, tragically many Burmese working on Thailand's western seaboard were swept away by the wave. Before the disaster there were 60,000 registered Burmese workers in Thailand's six western seaboard provinces—Phang Nga, Phuket, Krabi, Ranong, Trang, and Satun—and an unknown number of illegal Burmese migrants.

According to a January 8 report by the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma, or HREIB, between 700 and 1,000 Burmese migrants died in southern Thailand as a result of the tsunami (other NGOs' estimates are higher)—many more than died in Burma itself. To date, 156 bodies of Burmese nationals have been identified. The identification process is complicated, the report noted, because there is “no dental data or DNA material available on Burmese dead and missing persons to identify them.”

Kyaw Myint and his wife were in Phang Nga Hospital receiving treatment in early January. About 40 other injured Burmese survivors were also being treated there, the recipients of Thai hospitality and medical care. But many other Burmese tsunami survivors in Thailand have not been so lucky with officialdom.

Post-tsunami Burmese migrant survivors, many of whom lost all their possessions and their identity and registration papers, now face another crisis—Thailand's Immigration Department has been rounding up Burmese nationals that cannot prove they are in Thailand legally and deporting them. (This has complicated and slowed the victim identification effort as many Burmese have been too afraid to visit body collection centers.)

The Thai Immigration Department said that 1,500 Burmese migrant workers were deported in the two weeks following the tsunami. The normal procedure for the deportation of illegal aliens is to first put them before a court. But in the wake of the disaster, Burmese deportees from southern Thailand have been simply herded into detention centers, then loaded onto boats without recourse to the judiciary.

Htoo Chit, coordinator of the HREIB's relief effort in the area, said the group is seeking assistance from the Law Society of Thailand and sympathetic Thai politicians. The HREIB's lobbying, however, has been pre-empted by unsubstantiated press reports that Burmese nationals have been looting areas hit by the tsunami.

On January 8, *Khao Sod*, a mass circulation Thai newspaper carried the hysterical headline *Maung Thieves* (maung is a Thai pejorative term for Burmese). The body of the article claimed that at least a thousand Burmese looters on pickups were stripping Khao Lak, Phang Nga Province, bare. The paper disingenuously claimed that the “Burmese” looters had tricked local people into thinking they were southern Thais by learning to speak fluent Southern Thai dialect (apparently in anticipation of the tsunami).

The charge is ridiculous (it's rare for Burmese to speak any Thai dialect fluently. Even the few that speak reasonably fluent Thai are normally instantly identifiable by their strong Burmese accents). But that hasn't stopped a number of media pundits from commenting on the “Burmese looter problem”.

In contrast to the Burmese that are being deported for being unable to produce registration documents, there have been numerous reports of Thai employees refusing to allow traumatized Burmese workers to return home.

The situation reached farcical proportions on January 12 when three World Vision relief workers helping Burmese migrant workers who wanted to return to Burma were accosted by a mob in the fishing village of Ban Thab Lamu, Phang Nga Province (World Vision coordinator Somyos Leetrakul, a Thai national, was beaten by the crowd and later had to be hospitalized).



A funeral service for Burmese victims in Khao Lak, Phang Nga Province, Thailand

PHOTO: GRASSROOTS IHR

Survivors in Thailand



PHOTO: JOHN HULME

A Burmese migrant worker, aged 26, weeps as he displays his wedding picture during a funeral for 15 Burmese tsunami victims in Ko Khoa, Phang Nga Province. His wife was six months pregnant when she was killed by the tsunami. Tun Kay found her body in the wreckage but was told by rescue personnel that he would have to go to a collection center if he wanted to claim it. None of the victims' bodies were present at the ceremony—all the surviving relatives of the victims' were afraid to collect them

The three—Somyos and two Burmese co-workers—were then driven to the nearby Thai Muang police station and detained, but not formally arrested. The police said they were making investigations into the activities of the World Vision workers. No one was arrested in connection with the beating of Somyos Leetrakul. According to Chuwong Saengkong, another World Vision staffer, the fracas was incited by a local fishing operator concerned that his Burmese workers would desert him. World Vision temporarily shut its operation in Phang Nga.

While official treatment of other foreign nationals caught up in the tsunami in southern Thailand has been laudable, the attitude towards the poorest and most vulnerable segment of the survivor community has been sadly lacking. ■

PHOTO: AMANCHAN



Destruction in Khao Lak has left many Burmese jobless

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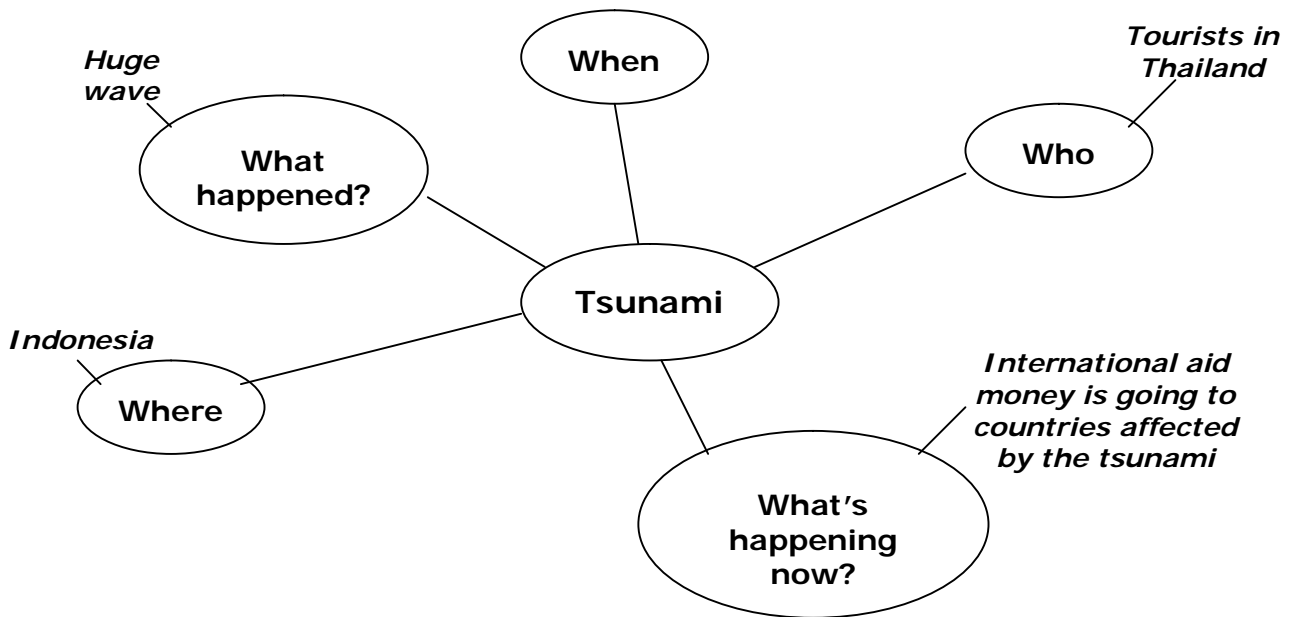
To accompany January 2005 Issue of Irrawaddy Magazine

Selected article: *Pity Burmese Tsunami Survivors in Thailand*, page 22

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

Mind-map: What do you know about the Tsunami?



Activity 2

What does the title mean?

The title of this article is *Pity Burmese Tsunami Survivors in Thailand*.
What does this mean? Who are the Burmese survivors? What do they do? Where in Thailand do they live?

Activity 3**Predict the answers.**

a) Guess the answers to these questions.

1. How many Burmese people in Thailand died in the Tsunami?
2. How many registered Burmese workers lived in South-Western Thailand?
3. How many Burmese people were deported by the Thai authorities in the two weeks after the tsunami?
4. Do the Thai authorities treat foreign tsunami victims well?

b) Now read the article. Were you correct?

Activities to do During Reading**Activity 4****Key vocabulary**

- a) Scan the text and underline any words you don't know.
- b) Work in groups. Try to identify the meanings of these words in their dictionaries.
- c) Match these words with their definitions

devastated	<i>to attack</i>
trawler	<i>difficult</i>
complicated	<i>admirable, very good</i>
round up	<i>mad, crazy</i>
pre-empt	<i>to steal things after a disaster</i>
hysterical	<i>very stupid</i>
loot	<i>a type of fishing boat</i>
ridiculous	<i>to force people into one face</i>
accost	<i>destroyed, broken</i>
laudable	<i>to do something before something happens</i>

Activity 5**Match the paragraphs**

a) Give students these paragraph summaries. Students match the summaries with the paragraphs. They can do this alone, in pairs, or in groups.

1. Some injured Burmese are getting treated in Thai hospitals.
2. The newspapers claim that Burmese people are pretending to be Thai, and looting people's possessions.
3. Thai immigration is deporting many people, without taking them to court first.
4. Many Burmese migrant workers on the West coast of Thailand were killed in the tsunami.
5. Some villagers attacked some aid workers who were trying to help Burmese tsunami victims.
6. Many Burmese lost their ID. Thai immigration is arresting people who don't have ID.
7. Most Burmese people can't speak fluent Thai.
8. The Thai government is good to foreign tourists, but not Burmese migrants affected by the tsunami.
9. Kyaw Myint was working on a fishing boat when he witnessed the tsunami.
10. Many Thai employers don't allow their Burmese workers to return home.
11. Some Thai people are sympathetic to the Burmese tsunami victims. However, the newspapers are accusing Burmese people of looting.
12. More Burmese people were killed in Thailand than in Burma. It is difficult to identify Burmese victims.
13. Nobody was arrested for beating the aid workers, and police are investigating the aid agency.

Activity 6**Identify the main point**

What is the main point of this article?

- 1) Many Burmese migrant workers were killed in the Tsunami.
- 2) Burmese tsunami victims are not treated well by the Thai government.
- 3) Some Burmese migrant workers lost their ID documents in the tsunami.
- 4) Some organizations are helping Burmese tsunami victims in Thailand.

Activity 7**Comprehension questions**

Answer these questions.

- 1) How many Burmese workers lived in the tsunami-affected provinces?
- 2) Why is it difficult to identify bodies of Burmese people?
- 3) Is Phang Nga hospital helping injured Burmese people?
- 4) What does *Khao Sod* newspaper claim Burmese people are doing?
- 5) Do many Burmese people speak fluent Thai?
- 6) What is Somyos Leetrakul's job?
- 7) What happened to Somyos Leetrakul when he tried to help tsunami victims return to Burma?
- 8) How many people were arrested for beating Somyos Leetrakul?

Activity 8

Fact, opinion, or hypothesis?

These statements from the article are either *facts*, *opinions* or *hypotheses*.

A *fact* is something that is definitely true – there is proof available to support this.

An *opinion* is what someone thinks, it is not definitely true or false, as it depends on the beliefs of the person.

A *hypothesis* might be a fact, but there is no proof, or not enough proof to make it a fact, so we don't know for sure.

Which are which?

- 1) He was working on a trawler based in Phang Nga Province until December 26
- 2) Before the disaster there were 60,000 registered Burmese workers in Thailand's six western seaboard provinces
- 3) The identification process is complicated because there are no dental data or DNA material available
- 4) The HREIB is seeking assistance from the Law Society of Thailand and sympathetic Thai politicians
- 5) The charge is ridiculous
- 6) The situation reached farcical proportions on January 12
- 7) The fracas was incited by a local fishing operator concerned that his workers would desert him
- 8) Official treatment of other foreign nationals has been laudable

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 9

What do you think?

Answer these questions with your own ideas.

- a) Why are the Thai immigration authorities deporting Burmese tsunami victims, without taking them to court?
- b) According to World Vision, their workers were beaten because a local fishing operator was afraid his Burmese workers would desert him. Why was the fishing operator afraid his Burmese workers would desert him?
- c) What could the Thai authorities do to improve conditions for Burmese tsunami victims?

Activity 10

Write a letter.

You work for HREIB. Write a letter to Prime Minister Thaksin, describing the situation of Burmese migrant tsunami victims, and asking for better treatment for them.

Activity 11

Roleplay

Work in groups of three. Decide what these people would say to each other, then have the discussion.

Student 1: A Thai fishing boat owner. You are afraid the Burmese people who work on the fishing boat will leave to go back to Burma. If this happens, your boat will not have people to do any work, and you will lose a lot of money.

Student 2: A Burmese fisher. You want to return to Burma for a short time, to check that you family are OK. You are afraid because your family live near the sea, and you don't know if the tsunami has affected them.

Student 3: A Burmese fisher. Some of your young cousins were working on another boat. They are missing, and you want to go down to the body identification centre and see if they have been killed. You want permission to leave for only one day, then you will come back and work.

