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TODAY'S PAPER

INTERNATIONAL

Migrants becoming hidden victims of tsunamis

By GEOFFREY YORK
Tuesday, January 11, 2005 - Page A7

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BANGKOK -- In secret hideouts in the mountains of Thailand, hundreds of fugitive migrants are holding religious ceremonies for the tsunami victims who have been largely forgotten.

At least 700 migrant workers from Myanmar were killed when the tsunamis hit Thailand, according to new estimates by human-rights workers who have conducted the first detailed survey of the migrants since the disaster.


In death, as in life, the migrants are being treated with disdain by officials of both countries. Most of the dead migrants lacked registration papers and are not included in the official death toll of about 5,300 in Thailand and 59 in Myanmar. The surviving migrants, who often lost everything they owned, are unable to get relief assistance and have been subjected to intensified harassment and arrest by the police.

About 60,000 migrant workers from Myanmar, previously known as Burma, live in the Thai disaster zone. Having left their homeland because of desperate poverty and the repression of a military dictatorship, many found jobs as fishing-boat crew members or restaurant workers, but the largest number were low-paid construction workers, providing manual labour to build new luxury beachfront

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hotels.

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When the giant waves hit, the migrants were particularly vulnerable. Many sought shelter in the half-built shells of the new hotels.

"The walls collapsed and they died," said Aung Myo Min, director of the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma, who is trying to help the survivors.

Many of the surviving migrants have been arrested by Thai police. They are accused of looting the homes and shops of Thai tsunami victims. To escape the police, an estimated 1,000 migrants have fled in small groups to secret locations in the mountains, in rubber plantations or abandoned construction sites. They cannot even claim the bodies of their dead relatives because of their fear of the authorities.

"They live in fear of arrest," Aung Myo Min said. "They're in a very traumatized situation. . . . They are already traumatized by the tsunami, and we cannot offer them any counselling."

Just yesterday afternoon, the police raided one mountain hideout and arrested 20 migrants, he said.

Despite official promises that all victims would be given the same rights and the same assistance, most of the migrants have not been registered as legal residents of Thailand, and are therefore barred from getting official relief, he said.

"The Burmese migrants are always treated as second-class citizens, always looked down upon by the Thai people. They are ignored, neglected and marginalized. This is the discrimination that they face. It's a violation of their international rights."

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From talking to witnesses or surviving family, rights activists have compiled a detailed list of 163 migrants who were killed by the tsunamis. Based on this list and other research, the activists estimate that at least 700 were killed. They say the migrants have secretly held four Buddhist ceremonies in the mountains in memory of those who died.

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About 600 survivors are now getting food and medical aid from the activists. Many are increasingly vulnerable because they lost their legal documents in the tsunamis. Some have tried to return to Myanmar, but in many cases they are forced to seek shelter in a refugee camp near the border, under armed guard, before they can eventually be allowed to cross the border.

"We're extremely concerned by reports that their lack of legal status is making it difficult or impossible for them to get the disaster relief they desperately need," said a statement this week by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.

Another group, the Canadian Friends of Burma, is trying to raise funds for the migrants. "These people had a pretty tough time even before the tsunami," said Shareef Korah, the group's executive director. "They don't have any legal status, which could really hurt their access to medical care and relief aid. It's a devastating blow to an already vulnerable group."

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