

# BURMA



AWY Map by Boyet Rivera II

## A. Total Stock (Number) of Migrants, as of 2005

MIGRANTS ABROAD	
ESTIMATED STOCK: MIGRANTS OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY	
TOTAL	3 million (est)
a. By visa status	Documented migrant workers* -
	Emigrants/residents -
	Undocumented migrants** -
	Refugees*** 164,864
b. By sex	Male -
	Female -
c. Top destination countries	1. Thailand - 921,492      6. South Korea 2. Bangladesh      7. China 3. India      8. Japan - 10,000 4. Malaysia      9. 5. Singapore      10.

\* Non-resident, temporary, or contract workers.

\*\* Includes illegal entrants, overstayed or "jumped" visas, trafficked/smuggled people

MIGRANTS IN BURMA	
ESTIMATED STOCK: MIGRANTS IN THE COUNTRY	
TOTAL	-
a. By visa status	Documented migrant workers* -
	Emigrants/residents -
	Undocumented migrants** -
	Refugees*** 21,053
b. By sex	Male -
	Female -
c. Top countries of origin	1. China 6. 2. 7. 3. 8. 4. 9. 5. 10.

\*\*\* As defined by the government, or in accordance with the UN refugee convention.

## B. Annual Socio-Economic Data and Migration Flow

Annual indicators	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000
Population (million; mid-year estimate)	47.3820		53.22	52.17	51.14	50.13
% population living below poverty line				10.40		25.00
Economic growth: real GDP (%)	2.90	(1.30)		5.30	2.30	13.70
Per capita GDP (US\$)			179	175	162	210
Per capita GDP: purchasing power parity (US\$)	1,700	1,700		1,700		
Inflation rate: CPI (%) annual ave.)	25.0	17.2	36.6	57.1	21.1	(0.8)
Exchange rate: (MMK per US\$; annual ave.)	5.76(1,075)	5.75(900)	6.0800	6.5700	6.6800	6.43(435)
International reserves (US\$ billion; yearend)			0.56	0.48	0.41	0.23
Foreign direct investments: actual (US\$ million; yearend)						0.26
Trade balance (US\$ billion; yearend)						
Foreign (total external) debt (US\$ billion; fiscal yearend)	6.967	6.752		6.0		6.0
Foreign (total external) debt as % of GNP						
Budget balance (MMK billion; fiscal yearend)						
Budget deficit as % of GDP						
Labor force (million)	27.75	27.0		25.6	24.9	24.3
Women as % of labor force						
Number unemployed (000)						
Unemployment rate (% of labor force)	5.0			5.1		4.1
Underemployment rate (% labor force)						
Women unemployment rate (% of labor force)						
Adult literacy rate (% of age 15 & above who can read/write)	85.30					
Net migration rate (net # of migrants per 1,000 popn)						
Annual outflow/deployment of MWs						
% women in the annual outflow						
Annual inflow of MWs						
% women in the annual inflow						
Annual migrants' remittance (US\$ billion/yr)						
Reported # of migrant deaths during the year						
Estimated # deported during the year						
Jailed/detained during the year						
HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate (adult PLHA as % of adult popn)	0.6-2.2	1.20		1.90		
# People living with HIV/AIDS (thousand)	338,911.0	330,000.0		530,000.0		
# AIDS deaths during the year (adults+children)		20,000		65,000		
Cumulative #: HIV/AIDS cases among migrants (living+died)						

Sources: CIA World Factbook, UN/ILO/UNDP statistical yearbooks/websites.



Photo courtesy of MNN

Life in rural area, Arakan State, Burma, 2006

## BURMA

*This report was compiled with the assistance of information provided by the Mekong Migration Network.*

### Political and Economic Update

Economic hardship, lack of opportunities, forced labor and a host of other difficulties continue to plague Burmese citizens under the rule of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In late 2004 – 2005, the military regime shrugged off ongoing economic sanctions and political pressure by the international community, occupying itself instead with an internal power struggle. In a bizarre move found inexplicable by many, the regime also announced it would be re-locating its capital from the harbor city of Yangon to a remote village in the center of the country. Meanwhile, continued

calls for democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest, including appeals by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, appear to have made no tangible impact whatsoever. In November 2005 the junta announced that Suu Kyi would remain in detention.

Number three in the junta hierarchy, Khin Nyunt, who had been appointed prime minister in August 2003 and seen as something of a moderate, was ousted in October 2004. As the drama played out, health reasons were first given for his removal from office, followed later by corruption charges. In July 2005, Khin Nyunt was handed a 44-year suspended jail sentence upon being convicted of eight charges, including corruption and bribery. Commentators speculated the move was the result of a power struggle, as an aging General Than Shwe worried about opposition to his rule. The General, who controls the army, was also reportedly reacting in response to a conflict between the army and military intelligence, headed by Khin Nyunt.

It was reported that the intelligence bureau has also been dismantled and those close to Khin Nyunt arrested and/or ousted.

Those who had hoped that Khin Nyunt and his Seven Step Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy might bring the country towards a more moderate form of rule by the junta saw this as a blow to democratic reform. It may also be a harbinger of future actions by the military regime to wipe out or severely weaken the tenacious democracy movement in the country. Hardliner Soe Win, who was appointed new PM to replace Khin Nyunt, is suspected of being behind the notorious “Black Monday” attack on Aung San Suu Kyi’s convoy in March 2003 which led to her capture and detention.

The removal of Khin Nyunt also brought talks with the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic minority opposition group, to a halt. The talks had been headed by Khin Nyunt, and were cut short after his removal from office. A hard-won verbal ceasefire agreed upon in 2003 eventually collapsed and fighting broke out between the two sides. In November 2005 the junta launched a major offensive focused especially on Karen state.

Nor were Burma’s international relations free from conflict. A row broke out over Burma’s inclusion in the Asian-European Meeting (ASEM) leading up to the October 2004 summit held in Hanoi, Vietnam. The EU had objected to the proposed participation of Burma due to its egregious human rights record and restricted political environment. Asian countries, however, felt it was their choice to select Asian ASEM members; in July, Cambodia threatened to boycott the meeting if Burma was not allowed to attend. The EU decided to drop its objections to Burma’s attendance. At the summit, the EU threatened to impose new sanctions on Burma and criticized its human rights record, but failed to mention Aung San Suu Kyi. In addition, international discord caused by Burma’s upcoming turn to host ASEAN in 2006 did pressure the regime into passing up its right to

chairmanship.

Practices by the junta such as forced labor have also subjected it to severe criticism by international bodies. The ILO continues to call Burma to task for its forced labor violations, as it’s done since 2000. In June 2005, the ILO stated that it was, “unacceptable to the ILO that a member state not only tolerated such practices, but was itself responsible for them”. Burma had made threats to withdraw from the ILO, but the two parties have since met to discuss continuing relations.

The country’s dismal Human Development ranking – 129 out of 177 in 2005 – highlighted the regime’s failure to improve the living conditions of its citizens. In addition to its previously imposed sanctions, the US announced it would withhold AIDS funding; meanwhile, official statistics estimated 338,911 HIV infections in September 2004; UNAIDS and WHO estimate prevalence range of 0.6% to 2.2%. Disease and food insecurity are other serious problems faced by Burmese citizens.

According to the SPDC, Burma’s economy grew 12.2% in 2005, although this figure is much higher than that cited by the CIA World Factbook, which estimated GDP growth at 2.9%. Burma’s main trading partners are Thailand, Singapore, India, China and Japan, although Japan has recently imposed investment restrictions with Burma. SPDC stated it had a foreign trade surplus exceeding USD1 billion and exports totalling USD2.77 billion. According to the CIA Factbook, trade figures are underestimated in light of the large smuggling and black market trade. This source also states that the banking sector is extremely restricted, and is still weak from the 2003 crisis.

### **Migration Update**

With an estimated 10% of its population migrating out of Burma – a higher percentage



Photo courtesy of MNN

Burma-Thailand border.

of migrant worker stock to population than the Philippines – the country is a large sending country for migrant workers. The most popular destination for Burmese migrants continues to be Thailand, with over one and a half million migrants estimated to be living there. Other receiving countries with significant Burmese populations include South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore. The number of Burmese migrants in these countries, however, will most likely remain comparatively small due to lack of viable migration channels in Burma. It remains virtually impossible for the average Burmese to migrate through legal channels, as Burmese workers must have a passport, which is very difficult to obtain, have well-placed connections, and pay large amounts of money in order to migrate. Generally, only the wealthier, better-educated Burmese are able to utilize these channels. The vast majority of migrant workers continue to migrate through informal channels, generally crossing the border with a guide or on their own, often under dangerous conditions.

In the case of Thailand, however, Burmese migrants are able to obtain documented status upon entering the country through Thailand's registration system (See Thailand Country Report on p.309 for details). In July 2005,

921,492 Burmese migrant workers registered for temporary residence cards, with (slightly less: 90% of 900,000) registering for work permits between 1 August and 15 November 2004. Thailand's registration process, then, has effectively documented 900,000 Burmese workers. Burma has also signed an MOU with Thailand on employment cooperation. This is a major step for Burma, who in past years has been reluctant to even admit that there was migration for employment taking place at all. Burma's implementation of the MOU, however, has been far from satisfactory. According to the terms of the MOU, the SPDC is supposed to verify the country of origin and issue travel documents for Burmese migrants already in Thailand. Due to the sheer number of migrants to be processed, this will be a significant task; through the end of 2005, it does not appear that the SPDC has made any efforts to carry out this commitment, with not a single migrant yet verified.

Migrants continue to leave the country for reasons such as poverty, forced relocation, forced labor, sexual violence and lack of educational opportunities in Burma; it does not appear that conditions are improving. The migration process can be extremely difficult for potential migrants, and the conditions of Burmese workers in the host

## Burma Significant Events July 2004 – December 2005

### 2004

#### October

Former No. 3, Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, is ousted and placed under house arrest. Health reasons were the initial justification given for the move, but criminal charges are eventually brought against him. Soe Win was appointed as Prime Minister to replace him.

#### November

Over 9,000 prisoners are released from Burmese jails, including Min Ko Naing, a well-known dissident. Many of those released, however, were small-time criminals; over 1,100 political prisoners are said to remain locked up.

#### December

**(26)** Boxing Day Tsunami hits Burma's coast; government reports 59 people are killed and more than 3,000 homeless. Thousands of documented and undocumented Burmese migrant workers are also severely affected in Thailand.

### 2005

#### February

"Constitutional convention resumes, but without the participation of the main opposition and ethnic groups. Talks end in January 2006 with no reports of any clear outcomes." (combine the various articles about the constitutional talks)

#### May

**(7)** 150-200 people are injured and 23 killed as three bombs go off in shopping districts throughout Yangon.

#### July

Burma declines to accept the 2006 chairmanship of ASEAN; the military regime had been under pressure by ASEAN for its egregious human rights record.

**(22)** BBC News reports that former PM Khin Nyunt was convicted of corruption and bribery charges, among others, and handed a 44-year suspended sentence.

#### September

SPDC enacts "The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law" imposing penalties including imprisonment on traffickers, as well provisions for repatriation, reintegration and rehabilitation of trafficking victims.

#### November

Government announces it will move its seat from Yangon to the remote town of Pyinmana, located in the center of the country. The move baffles many.

#### December

Government launches attacks in Karen and Karen states, forcing thousands to flee.

Sources: BBC News, AP, Scalabrini Asian Migration News

country, particularly Thailand, and the hardships they face have also been repeatedly documented in past issues of *AMY*, the *Resource Book: Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion* series, and numerous other publications. Some of these include ILO's "Mekong Challenge" series, MAP 2006 publication, and World Bank's "Labor Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion, A Synthesis Report" (2006).

Hardships faced by Burmese migrants abroad

include poor living and working conditions, underpayment or nonpayment of wages, inability to form unions or engage in collective action, retaliatory action in event of complaints, poor quality of life, difficulty in accessing health care, fear of arrest and deportation, and related issues. In June 2005, Amnesty International published a study focusing on the conditions of migrant workers in Thailand detailing all of these factors, one of many reports published

## TSUNAMI HIGHLIGHTS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MIGRANTS IN THAILAND

The December 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami devastated six provinces (Satun, Trang, Krabi, Phang Nga, Phuket, and Ranong) in southern Thailand, displacing and killing thousands. The United Nations estimates that the tsunami caused USD1.6 billion in damages in Thailand.

Despite overwhelming humanitarian response to provide aid to all affected by the tsunami, the basic needs and rights of many migrants in the region were denied. Thousands of Burmese migrant workers living and working in the affected regions faced discrimination and neglect as a result of their restricted access to information and public services, uncertain legal status, and negative perception of them as migrants.

Burmese migrants living in southern Thailand are primarily employed in construction, rubber plantations, fishing and shrimp farming, hospitality services, and – since the tsunami – rebuilding resorts and hotels. While some 120,000 migrants in the area were legally registered, it is estimated that more than 60,000 undocumented Burmese migrants were affected by the tsunami. According to an assessment done by the Action Network for Migrants (Thailand) it was estimated that 2,500 migrants could be dead and possibly 7,000 missing or unaccounted for in the Takuapa district of Phang Nga province alone. The total number of migrants killed in the province could exceed 5,000. However, the actual number of migrants dead and missing may never be known, because of the large number of undocumented migrants, combined with the fact that many survivors have fled or are in hiding, as well as the extreme difficulty in safely communicating with families in Burma. Exacerbating the difficulties of accounting for

the losses was the reluctance of Burmese migrant workers to claim the bodies of their loved ones due to fears of arrest and deportation by the authorities.

The tsunami highlighted the vulnerable position of Burmese migrants in Thailand. The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), based in Thailand, found that 2,000 Burmese had been taken into custody with the intention of being deported. Many migrants lost their legal documents in the wake of the tsunami, which jeopardized their presence in the country. Even for registered workers who lost documents, legal status became a difficult thing to prove. With the help of Thai based advocacy groups like the Tsunami Action Group (TAG), formed to address the urgent needs of these migrants, some workers were reissued health cards, and resident and work permits. However, under pressure from employers and employment brokers, local governments stopped re-issuing documents.

In the tsunami aftermath many Burmese – particularly undocumented migrants – didn't seek health services. The Asia Media Forum reported the story of Soe Naing, a member of a fishing crew, who was injured during the tsunami. "I dared not see the doctors at that time because of my illegal status. I did not have a work permit, or a health card. That barred me from having access to any of the government's social welfare programs," he said. He tried treating himself with medication from a pharmacy, but his wounds eventually became seriously infected and doctors amputated his leg from the knee down.

Commemoration ceremonies in December 2005 recognized the losses of Thais and foreign nationals, but the Burmese losses have still not been acknowledged, underscoring the

unequal treatment they've experienced.

The Tsunami Action Group (TAG) – a combined effort of human rights community organizations and NGOs – formed quickly to aid Burmese migrants, and to make their plight evident to the international community. TAG distributed food and offered Burmese-speaking aid helping migrants to arrange burials and register newborn children. TAG facilitated with the Ministry of Interior the issuance of temporary ID cards for 120 Burmese workers. The group

also provided temporary financial assistance to help people through the interruption in their livelihoods.

TAG member groups HREIB, Grassroots HR and MAP Foundation have continued to work together to provide health education, counseling, referrals to state hospitals, legal assistance, and emergency relief. At the same time, each organization has its own long-term programs to empower migrant communities and address issues of well-being and rights.

every year by INGOs, NGOs, and migrants rights groups regarding the horrendous situation endured by Burmese migrants. At the present, there appears to be little opportunity for these workers to take significant action to fight for their rights, despite being promised equal protection under Thailand's labor laws. Repeated reports abound regarding Burmese migrant workers who are subject to intimidation, beatings, arrest and/or deportation if they complain about their working conditions. In addition to the numerous hardships undocumented Burmese migrants face abroad, they also face fines, imprisonment and mandatory HIV testing in the event that they are deported back to Burma.

The tsunami in Thailand highlighted many of these issues. (*See box story on opposite page*)

## Responses

As labor migration is considered by the SPDC to be a sensitive topic, most of the regime's efforts related to mobility of labor have been confined to combating trafficking and HIV/AIDS. In September 2005, Burma passed an Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law, which establishes a government body, the Working Group on Prevention of Trafficking in Persons and Protection of Trafficked Victims, to oversee

anti-trafficking efforts. The law also provides some safeguards for trafficking victims and sets out provisions for their return and reintegration, among others. It was reported that the government subsequently prosecuted 426 traffickers in 203 cases under the new law. Burma has hosted the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) meetings, working to enhance anti-trafficking efforts in the sub-region. It has also formed the Working Committee for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons as well as a task force. In addition, the regime cooperates with UN agencies and INGOs to carry out anti-trafficking efforts. The Myanmar National Committee on Women's Affairs works with the UN Interagency Project on Trafficking in Women and Children in the Mekong Sub-region (UNIAP) and other NGOs to carry out workshops designed to combat trafficking.

Burma's National AIDS Program and the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control of the Ministry of Home Affairs carry out efforts to combat HIV/AIDS. In addition, UN agencies, INGOs, and churches are also in the country working to provide responses to the disease. Unfortunately, however, the regime's restrictions have hindered some of these organizations' efforts. Global Fund to Fight AIDS withdrew its funding in Burma in August 2005, citing travel restrictions imposed by the regime. Moreover,



Photo courtesy of MMN

Burma-China border.

the country faces a number of challenges in its work. Treatment, care and support services for HIV/AIDS victims are reported to be grossly insufficient, with less than 5% of AIDS patients able to receive necessary ARV treatment. In regard to prevention, while Burma has 200 STI service delivery points in 83 townships and sufficient condom supplies in the country, cultural resistance to using condoms and openly discussing sex hinder some programs' efficacy. It is also difficult to reach marginalized groups such as drug users and sex workers.

It continues to be difficult for NGOs to directly respond to migrants' issues and needs, in light of the current restrictions in Burma. As the regime generally tries to discourage migration – often advertising the punishments for undocumented migrants as well as the dangers of migrating abroad – NGOs are largely unable to provide much-needed pre-migration training. As such, migration-related responses for Burmese migrants continue to be restricted to NGOs in receiving countries.

UNICEF and UNDP maintain offices in the country. Association Francois-Xavier Bagnoud

(FXB) works to combat AIDS, as does CAFOD, CARE (Australia), ICRC, Medicins Sans Frontiere-Holland, Save the Children (SCF-UK). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also conducts prison visits and works to train regime officials on international humanitarian law. In addition, World Vision carries out programs in the country.

#### Sources:

1. BBC News
2. Scalabrini Asian Migration News