

HUMAN RIGHTS USCRI REPORT

# Thailand urged to provide far greater assistance to refugees

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Thailand has been urged to better address the plight of hundreds of thousands of people who have fled persecution from neighbouring countries by providing them with shelter similar to the nine camps for Burmese refugees along the Thai-Burmese border.

The call was made by human rights activists speaking at yesterday's launch of the World Refugee Survey 2006 by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).

They said the government needs to come up with a more sincere and clearer policy to protect nearly a million undocumented immigrants fleeing to Thailand from various forms of persecution in their home countries.

Adisorn Kerdmongkol, a long-time researcher on migrant workers, said treatment of refugees among several governments including Thailand, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Bangladesh has been more stringent since the 9/11 incidents.

Muslim refugees, such as Rohingya tribespeople fleeing discrimination in Burma's Arakan state, were looked at with mistrust by the authorities, he said. Officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were requested to screen them "out"

rather than screen them in, Mr Adisorn said at yesterday's seminar.

The Thai authorities also remained rigid in their views on refugees he said.

"If they see no big fighting [in Burma], they will not consider those fleeing persecution as refugees despite the fact that the situation there has not changed in substance," Mr Adisorn said.

Surapong Kongchantuk, a member of the Lawyers Council of Thailand's Human Rights Committee, said the understanding of the plight of refugees among Thai society and government agencies remained limited.

"There are not just some 140,000 refugees in the nine camps along the Thai-Burmese border, but nearly a million immigrants who have mainly been forced to leave their countries for fear of rape, forced relocation, forced labour, and even outright massacre," Mr Surapong said.

He said it was time the Thai government accepted the existence of these people who are hiding and working in every corner of Thailand.

"We should conduct a survey and bring them into a camp or camps and allow international organisations including NGOs to help provide them with basic needs," Mr Surapong said.

The Thai government has however, been praised for issuing identity cards

to displaced people from Burma inside the nine camps along the Thai-Burma border, paving the way for better education and health care, he said.

However, the situation with thousands of Lao Hmong staying at a makeshift camp in Huay Nam Khao in Phetchabun province was a thorny issue for the Thai government at the moment, he added.

"The international community is not confident that sending some 7,000 Hmong back to Laos will be good for their future as they fought against the Laotian government a few decades ago. Thailand and Laos will be closely monitored on this issue," said Mr Surapong.

The USCRI launched 46 surveys in 52 countries including, for the first time, Thailand.

The three-page report on refugee status in Thailand assessed rights offered to displaced people in Thailand against the standards set under the UN's 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. They include their status, rights to physical and legal protection, freedom of movement and residence, right to earn a living, and access to public relief and education.

Thailand however, is not a signatory to the 1951 convention or the related 1967 Protocol.