

## ILLEGAL, TEMPORARY AND PRECARIOUS STATES OF BEING - MIGRATION

SEMINAR (FEB 15<sup>TH</sup> ) AND ART EXHIBITION (FEB 15<sup>TH</sup> - FEB 28<sup>TH</sup> 2010) Pridi Banhomyong Institute, Soi Thonglor, Soi 55 Sukhumvit,(BTS Thonglor)

On February 15<sup>th</sup>, a seminar and art exhibition held at the Pridi Banhomyong Institute explored the state of being of migrant workers in Thailand and globally. The title, “Illegal, Temporary and Precarious States of Being- Migration” already hinted at the frustration experienced by migrant workers and social activists at the current policies on migration. The threat of mass expulsion of all migrants who have not entered the Nationality Verification system by February 28<sup>th</sup> 2010 was frequently referred to during the seminar as a major cause of concern.

The seminar was opened by Prof. Worsak Kanok-Nukulchai, vice president of Asian Institute of Technology, Ms. Navsharan Singh of IDRC Canada and Mr. Katsumi Kakazu of the Japan Foundation.

The key note speech was delivered by Dr Lae Dilokvidhyarat, Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University who explored the concept of “ the other” , a concept created alongside the nation states. “ Alien is a new concept, previously people from other place were called “people with different language” , he explained. Dr Lae also pointed out that the the cycle of exploitation is difficult to break in our current economic system. Investors, businesspeople and employers work for profit. They want labour as cheap and compliant as it comes, and undocumented migrants without rights fit the bill. As he stated, “we normally say human resources, but workers are not resources. They are human”.

Mr Ekachai Pinkaew from the National Human Rights Commission addressed the difficulties of migrants, conferred only temporary status being able to exercise their rights which are enshrined as universal. Ms Ruedeerat Detprayoon from the Ministry of Labour explained the current policies and systems on migration and Ms Wilaiwan Saetia of the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee gave a strong message of support for migrant workers from Thai workers. Nong Dao talked about her experience as a domestic worker from Burma in Thailand while Chai, a construction worker in Chiang Mai who was unable to attend because of the restrictions on migrants right to travel, sent a video instead. Ms. Nong Dao, a Shan migrant worker expressed the difficulties by saying that she is “just a small women, trying to work honestly, not stealing, not cheating, but still we are caught as criminals”. Dr. Kyoko Kusakabe from Asian Institute of Technology who moderated the panel highlighted that large role the state plays in defining who is recognized as a “person”, but at the same time that state is the largest violator of human rights. Even when workers are following the rules and contributing to the economy, they are still not protected.

A Policy Brief on Undocumented Labour Migration was presented which suggested that the inflexibility of the current migration regime causes more migrants to work with illegal status and ensures that migrants have to stay in Thailand, even during times of economic crisis or job shortage. Returning home temporarily is not an option because of all the restrictions in place. The Policy brief recommended easing the multiple levels of restrictions and developing policies aimed at the integration of migrants into society. It called for a new approach to migration. The organizers had combined the seminar with an art exhibition in order to offer opportunities to explore new

approaches and to allow participants to experience the spaces where migrants live and work. “Without a change in thinking and in attitudes, new policies will also fail,” said Ms Jackie Pollock, MAP Foundation, in the closing remarks, “employers who confiscate the migrant worker card today will confiscate the temporary passport tomorrow, the employer who pays less than minimum wage today will pay less than the minimum wage tomorrow.”

The reality of the confiscation of documents, of the abysmal working conditions but also of the strength and resilience of the migrant workers was reflected in the art exhibition with a series of powerful photographs by John Hulmes and Nic Dunlop. The precarious and dangerous forms of travel that migrants have to endure because of the travel restrictions confronted the viewers as they arrived, first with an installation by Estelle Cohenny where multiple levels of precarious lives fluttered in the wind while menacing soldiers looked on, and then with the “Tyred Migrants”, wire models of migrants floating on rubber rings in the pond and in the representation by Somchai Pinisap of migrants packed into non-ventilated trucks.

An art performance by Padungsak Kochsamrong performed to a background of migrants telling their stories challenged borders, documents and decision making processes. An installation by Liz Hilton summed up the seminar and the art exhibiton, entitled “Reflecting on Today, Imagining Tomorrow” a digitally manipulated photograph of a scene depicting the discrimination which exists between how tourists and business people are treated and migrant workers. Her interactive installation offered the viewer the opportunity to change the scene and to create a new migration regime. The organizers of the art exhibition and seminar, MAP Foundation, Studio Xang, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and University of Leeds (UK) hope that the art exhibition and seminar can spark new ideas and approaches and can lead to a change in the state of being of migration from temporary, illegal and precarious to a state of integration, respect and social cohesion.

The exhibition is open until February 28<sup>th</sup> 2010, 9am – 5pm at the Pridi Banhomyong Institute, Soi Thonglor, Soi 55, Sukhumvit, Bangkok. Admission Free.



