

Chapter IV

Myanmar's Mons

Myanmar's Mons who have remained on Thai soil on a temporary basis since 1994 should be classified into two broad groups : Mon refugees or displaced persons and Mon immigrant workers both legal and illegal. The presence of all these Mon groups has not merely exerted cumulative psychological impacts on the mental configuration among various groups of Thailand's Mons but also has affected Thailand's political and economic climates in several respects.

With regard to Mon immigrant workers , Thailand's rapid economic expansion throughout the last two decades has led to increasing demand for cheap migrant labor, mostly from its less prosperous neighbouring countries : Myanmar, Cambodia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Among these, the ethnic Mons , as one of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups whose homeland shares a common border and who share some cultural patterns with the people of the western region of Thailand are significant in political, social and economic terms.

With respect to their contribution to Thailand's economic development, Mon seasonal workers traditionally helped harvest the crop in large plantations in many provinces of western Thailand. Rampant poverty in the Mon State and the attraction of the far stronger Thai currency have been major factors in making work in Thailand very attractive. Continued demand for labour from Myanmar has led to the establishment of a temporary permit system for seasonal workers in Ranong Prachuab and Kanchanaburi provinces. Until the beginning of this decade, an emergent trend of increasing political unrest and social insecurity has led thousands to arrive as tourists or traders , they have subsequently overstayed.

Today Mon male workers provide a source of manual labor for industry , agriculture and construction in various provinces across western and central Thailand , whereas Mon female workers have been recruited into domestic service. Many of these female workers are found in various sectors of the service industry , such as in hotels and restaurants in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi provinces. With an increasing demand for labor in the fishing industry , many Mons have been imported for work on trawlers at Mahachai in Samut Sakhon province and along the

coast line in Ranong province. These Mon workers usually take jobs which Thai workers have left or are unwilling to take , most of these Mon laborers are found to enjoy none of the rights or protection afforded under local labour law. Bangkok Post (13 February 1996)

As regards Mon social impact upon Thai society , it is generally acknowledged that most of Mons hold fast to Buddhist principles and their cultural traditions. For this reason, Buddhism has been inseparably intertwined with Mon life in all social strata. Some Buddhist elements however , such as reincarnation , have been selectively integrated into part of the Mon political myth. Many temples in western Thailand are found to be a refuge Mon students in exile who fled the dangers of pervasive political suppression in 1988. These Thai-Mon temples also function as a center for cultivating all Mon spiritual matters. Each year these Thai-Mon temples receive considerable donations both from Thai people and from Mon economic immigrants. Furthermore , some of these temples were found to be employed by the New Mon State Party as information centers , meeting venues or publishing houses for political propaganda. Until recently tougher measures have been taken by Thai authorities to restrict the spread of printed materials freighted with nationalistic overtone, as a result, political propaganda from many of

these Mon centers almost ceased to operate. Communication networks between Thai individuals of Mon blood and Myanmar's Mon nationalists dramatically decreased in intensity after the collapse in 1994, of what was the biggest military base and the supposed headquarters of the New Mon State Party.

It can be said that successive influxes of Mon economic migrants into Thailand has been motivated mostly by rampant poverty and underdevelopment in Myanmar and that their presence is behind Thailand's labor market expansion and economic growth over the past two decades . Their presence was not politicized until the year 1988 when political suppression by the Central Government led to an exodus of Mon political refugees into Thailand for asylum. This event and its aftermath caused long-standing political tension between Thailand and Myanmar following protests from Rangoon that the Thai Army provided a military support to these Mon refugees , most of whom Rangoon considered as hard-liners. To reduce this tension , the Bangkok-based UNHCR representative agency was called to assist the Thai Government in providing aid and shelter to needy Mon refugees along the Thai-Burmese border. Even so, Thailand has been accused of enforcing a policy that does not allow international assistance to reach the Mon living along the

border. With difficulties in distinguishing Mon political activists from civilians, further complicated by a lack of understanding of international instruments Thailand's treatment of needy Mon refugees and Mon hard liners has been more or less the same and thus has been severely criticized by the West as not making any distinction between the natures of the two groups.(Committee for Publicity of People's Struggle in Monland Newsletter NO1 V.12)

Prior to the 1980s, few could have predicted that Thailand's security paranoia, a deep fear of the Communist threat from Indochinese countries, would be replaced by a new feeling of social insecurity caused by problems associated with various types of international population movement, mostly from Myanmar, throughout the 90s. This fear is reflected in the warning statement delivered by Security Committee spokesman Supat Thamphet that, "there are more than two million illegal foreigner workers in Thailand. Their presence poses a serious threat to the Kingdom's security. Most are Burmese and many have been sent here for the express purpose of espionage. Some Burmese are sent to work as assistants or maids in the houses of prominent public figures, where they try to gather information or steal state secrets. There are several cases where police and military officers were found to be involved. One case involved police officers who smuggled 3,000 to

4,000 Burmese into the country". Scenarios involving hundreds of Mon illegal economic migrants , as far away as even the provinces of eastern Thailand bordering Cambodia , are becoming common. Supat said problems along the border involve repeated violations of Thai sovereignty and smuggling of contraband, drugs and weapons. Political unrest and ethnic insurgency in Burma also mean an increase in arms purchases by the military government in Rangoon. (The Nation (22 March 1996))

On the subject of the Mon displaced persons; according to figures derived from estimates of the National Security Council ,there were approximately 10,000 Mon displaced persons in Thailand in 1995 (see Table 1). These figures are not exhaustive and do not include those falling outside the UNHCR mandate-for example, the more than 3,000 Mons who should be classified as refugee-warriors rather than bona-fide refugees or displaced persons. What should be noted is that Thailand has a stringent asylum policy and on several occasions has been accused of failure to respect the principles of non-refoulement. Traditionally Thailand has never advocated an idea of integrating aliens into her society , for security reasons. Not suprisingly , the term "refugee" and its application to the Mons in question is presently avoided in Thailand on several grounds. First, the Thai government fears future adverse

political consequences that might ensue as a result of its application of refugee status to the Mon since many among them are found to be politically active or to harbour a strong sense of ethnic Mon nationalism. Second , the prolonged existence of these Mons as refugees with rights on Thai soil will lead to a future increase in the economic burden that the Thai Government has already shouldered in dealing with ethnic persons from Myanmar.

Refugee-warriors in the temporary role of putative refugees as one facet of our current knowledge of trans-border ethnic nationalist life has discouraged the Thai Government from taking any strong legal or political action on the matter of awarding refugee status to Myanmar's ethnic applicants. From the perspective of the Thai Army, how to determine who deserves the status of bona-fide refugee remains a difficult question, but distinguishing between refugees and refugee-warriors in a real situation of ethnic conflict is even more difficult. For that reason, Thailand has chosen to use its immigration terminology to place these Mons within the web of immigration legislation and thereby the provision of permanent asylum or settlement in Thailand as a solution is thus ruled out on the assumption that all Myanmar's Mons

illegally entering and residing in Thailand will be repatriated to their homeland immediately after peace is restored.

Thailand is a country which is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and holds a conviction that influxes of Burmese refugees of all ethnic groups to neighbouring countries, especially and most conveniently to Thailand which shares a long common border with Myanmar, pose serious threats not only to the national security of Thailand but also to the security and stability of the entire region. So far Thailand has preferred to provide temporary asylum to these Mon refugee claimants in order to honour the non-refoulement principle; a central concept of the UN Refugee Convention which emphasises an obligation on the part of the State concerned not to drive back all those fleeing to her borders from the land where violence or persecution of all type is available. (Committee for Publicity of People's Struggle in Monland Newsletter NO1 V.12)

According to the Thai official view, a grant of permanent asylum might promote further inflows of refugees , or other related categories , into the Kingdom, damaging its economy, social security and political stability. The term displaced persons has been applied to the Mon case as a solution throughout the 80s and upto the present time.

Among other state mechanisms , the National Security Council of Thailand has traditionally been responsible for the administration of policies related to all aspects of national security , displaced persons and refugees included. The Royal Thai Army is entrusted with monitoring the situation amongst Burmese refugees and displaced persons at the border. Internalization of Mon displaced persons within a so called safe area was adopted as a practical measure so that the Mon displaced person might be prevented from any effort to call for support from abroad.

Mr.Yuan Thon , one of New Mon State Party members , has asserted that it is Thailand's policy that does not allow international assistance to reach Mons living along the Thai-Burmese border. Thailand wants to pressure Mon displaced persons on the border to return home and now that a ceasefire has been agreed between the New Mon State Party and the SLORC. this should soon have as impact on Mons in Thailand. (Bangkok Post (13 Febuary 1996))

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