

More migrant offices to open: Abhisit

By Nyunt Win

May 9 - 15, 2011



Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva at a weekly cabinet meeting in Bangkok on May 3. Pic: AFP

THAILAND plans to accelerate the registration process of undocumented migrant workers from neighbouring countries, including Myanmar, Prime Minister Mr Abhisit Vejjajiva said last week.

Speaking on the sidelines of the two-day Publish Asia 2011 conference held in Bangkok last month, Mr Abhisit told The Myanmar Times his government planned to open more registration offices on Thai soil, which would make it more convenient for migrant workers to complete the process.

“We want to expedite ... the issue of the identification of nationality process, which [in] previous times had to take place on the Myanmar side of the border,” Mr Abhisit said on April 28. “But now we have had an agreement with them [Myanmar authorities] that it can be conducted on this side of the border.”

The Thai government had set a February 2011 deadline for migrant workers to enter the verification process but Mr Abhisit said another round of registrations would be necessary, as many were still working illegally.

“We should speed up the backlog of 500,000 to 600,000 that still need to go through the process,” he said. “And we will agree to go through a new round of registration because we believe that the number of Myanmar migrant workers here in Thailand is around two million.”

According to the Thai Ministry of Labour, about 1.3 million migrants from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos have so far registered for the program. However, as of February, only 845,139 temporary passports had been issued.

Mr Abhisit said he expected the Dawei deepsea port, being developed near the Tanintharyi Region capital of Dawei, would create job opportunities for local people and in turn reduce the number of migrants to Thailand.

“We want to link up with that port. I have already approved the upgrading [of] highways and also rail links so that not only will [there] be opportunities for Thai businessmen but also we hope that [the project] will create a number of jobs in Myanmar, which in itself will help reduce pressure [on Thailand from] migrant workers.”

Late last month, Mr Abhisit’s office released a directive stating that illegal migrant workers would have

more time to register for the process. Illegal workers detained by the authorities would be encouraged to register for a temporary passport and avoid being deported.

Migrant workers are a contentious and politically charged issue in Southeast Asia and governments in the region have struggled to reach a formal agreement on the rights they should be afforded. Many work illegally and suffer discrimination at the hands of both employers and local officials. At the same time, they are often resented by their adopted communities.

In early April, organisations under the Taskforce on ASEAN Migrant Workers, a group that lobbies for the rights of migrant workers, called on leaders to establish a regional framework that legally binds ASEAN countries to address the issue, The Jakarta Post reported last month.

“Of the 600 million people in ASEAN, 56 percent work in the informal sector. Hence an instrument that legally grants protection for informal workers is crucial. Talks on economic integration in the region will in no way be effective without protecting migrant workers,” Mr Sinapan Samyadorai, the taskforce’s regional director, was quoted as saying.

The newspaper reported that ASEAN nations had so far been unable to sign a formal agreement because of the different political interests of each member state.

The drafting of an ASEAN Framework Instrument on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers was commenced at a meeting in Kuala Lumpur in December 2009, but negotiations have been stalled since then. An ASEAN senior officials’ meeting in Yogyakarta in March also failed to produce an agreement because the four big receiving states – Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei – were reluctant to touch on it, The Jakarta Post said.

In addition to the migrant workers issue, Mr Abhisit also highlighted the importance of regional cooperation in combating drug and human trafficking.

“We continue to suffer from the drug problem and again a lot of that still involves movements across the borders so we will seek cooperation from all our neighbours to help deal with this problem, which is a common problem for us,” he said.

“[The] human trafficking issue is more complicated ... we are dealing with all the sending countries, receiving countries and countries where these people are in transition,” the prime minister said.

When asked about his position on Myanmar’s application for the ASEAN chair in 2014, Mr Abhisit said ASEAN was an organisation that worked by consensus and it was up to the 10-member bloc to decide whether to allow Myanmar to become the chair. ASEAN leaders were expected to discuss the issue at the ASEAN Summit in Jakarta on May 7 and 8 but Mr Abhisit said he did not know whether that would happen.

“I don’t know whether we’ll discuss it. I don’t know how they will work it out,” he said.

Thai media recently reported that the government planned to repatriate more than 100,000 Myanmar refugees living in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, following the swearing in of a new government in late March. Rights groups have called on Thailand not to send the inhabitants of the refugee camps back until stability has been restored and their safe return is guaranteed.

Mr Abhisit said because Myanmar had a new government there was a window of opportunity for change and it might eventually be possible for those displaced in fighting to return to the country safely.

“We should be monitoring how much change takes place. Therefore it only makes sense to talk about preparation for those people to return,” he said. “It is not going to be an easy process. That’s not going to be a quick process. We need to start to think about these kinds of issues and make some

preparations.”

Mr Abhisit also reiterated his government’s vow to not allow ethnic armed groups to carry out anti-Myanmar government activities on Thai soil.

“We support efforts to achieve reconciliation. We won’t allow any group to use Thailand to engage in [anti-government] activities that will [harm] the fragile security of our neighbouring country. If there is fighting, people are displaced.”

... but Myanmar says no decision made yet

By Kyaw Hsu Mon

May 9 - 15, 2011

A DECISION has still not been made on whether to open two new offices in Thailand where migrant workers from Myanmar could apply for temporary passports, following discussions on the subject between the governments of Thailand and Myanmar in January, said a senior official from Special Branch under the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The talks, held January 23, focussed on whether to open new offices in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot.

“We talked with Thai immigration officials but no decision has been made because of the recent change in our government,” the official said.

“We discussed the issue [on January 23] at the 9th Thai-Myanmar official meeting for Myanmar workers in Thailand, so maybe we’ll have to bring it up again at the 10th meeting,” he said, although he could not specify when the next meeting would be held.

The two new offices would be in addition to three offices established in July 2009 – at Myawaddy in Kayin State, Tachileik in Shan State and Kawthoung in Tanintharyi Region – to issue temporary passports to migrant workers who were previously working in Thailand illegally but who have registered for the National Verification process.

However, the Myawaddy and Kawthoung offices were closed last year. Since then, temporary passports have been issued at Tachileik and a new office in Ranong, Thailand. Statistics from Special Branch show that the Ranong location has issued more passports than any other office, most likely because it is easier to reach for migrant workers in Thailand.

The passports are valid for two years, and applicants are required to pay a 100 baht (US\$3) processing fee.

“There are many Myanmar workers in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, so if they opened temporary passport offices in those places, it would be very good news for us,” said one Myanmar worker in Chiang Mai. “Workers can’t reach Ranong easily because of the cost of transportation.”

According to figures from the Ministry of Home Affairs, as of April 10, 64,112 passports had been issued in Myawaddy; 78,702 in Tachileik; 32,029 in Kawthoung; and 273,922 in Ranong.