



The Smuggling of Cambodian Migrant Workers to Thailand: “The Case Studies of Poipet City and Sa Kaeo Province”

Sovanna Marilyn and Witchayanee Ocha*

Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, Rangsit University

*Corresponding Author Email: witchayanee.o@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

This research aims to present the context of Cambodian migrant workers living illegally in Thailand, the overall situation of Smuggling of Migrants in Cambodia and Thailand Border, as well as the issue of human rights violations which continues to exist along the border between Cambodia and Thailand due to the steady increase of Smuggling of Migrants. Furthermore, the data were gathered through the methods that combined the secondary data with the primary data. The primary data have been acquired using an in-depth interview form with ten undocumented Cambodian migrants in Sa Kaeo Province and semi-structured interviews with an official, as well as other relevant peoples. The research also shows that most of the Cambodian migrant workers often choose to migrate illegally for reasons of believing in brokers and the cheap cost of migration. The research further finds that most of the Cambodian migrant workers were abused and exploited by the brokers as well as the employers at the workplace. Moreover, the scope of this research consists of a mechanism which collects from the Cambodia side. The study suggests that migration without precise and illegal information is always challenged with dangerous and high risk for migrant workers. Therefore, the workers who want to find jobs in neighboring countries should be aware of key information about migration before deciding to leave their own country. The smuggling of migrant workers is an illegal act and leads to the loss of people lives.

Keyword: *Cambodia, Thailand, Smuggling of Migrants, Undocumented migrant workers, Human Rights*

1. Introduction

After the end of the long war, known as the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot regime from 1975-1979, Cambodia begins to restore the country with the majority of people living in poverty. Most of the Cambodian population are confronting unemployment. According to Asian Development Bank (ADB), it has disclosed that the poverty line of Cambodia population has dramatically decreased from 47.8% in 2007 to 22.9% in 2009, 19.8% in 2011, and 18.9% in 2012. Almost 4.8 million people are poor and 90 percent of them stay in rural areas and rely upon farming for their business. (ADB, 2014, p. x). As indicated by the International Labor Organization (ILO), 300,000 young Cambodians are entering the labor market every year and not getting a high salary (ILO, 2017, para. 1). For this reason, many Cambodian populations decided to migrate and work abroad to run away from poverty.

The destination countries they choose to migration are such as China, Korea, and Japan but the most interesting country is Thailand due to similar culture and language. On the other hand, it is easy to cross the border either legally or illegally. The extreme difference in the level of development and economy between Thailand and its low-income neighbors such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos is increasingly attracting more migrants to search for work in Thailand (Chaisuparakul, 2015, p. 1).

Over the last two decades, Smuggling of Migrant is a concerning issue for Cambodia. The destination country where most of the Cambodian migrant workers smuggle into is Thailand. Clearly, thousands of Cambodian workers smuggled into Thailand, aiming to find work and earn a high income. The latest figures from the Cambodia Ministry of Labor show that there are 1,060,000 of Cambodian migrants working in Thailand, about 400,000 of which were undocumented migrant workers (Yinglun, 2018, pp. 2,8). The process of Smuggling of Migrants from Cambodia to Thailand has been facilitated along the border between Poipet city and Sa Kaeo Province. It is true that no one can know the exact number of undocumented migrant workers because they are not under the control of the Ministry of Labor.

Smuggling of Migrants is an ongoing international problem that affects security, society, and environment for all countries in the region. Concerning this problem, Cambodia, as well as Thailand, still



cannot find the policy to manage this issue, and it also causes the problem in terms of Human security in the region. Furthermore, the two countries have to cooperate in tightening border gates, especially small corridors to eliminate the smuggling system.

Definition and Concepts of Smuggling

Many developing countries around the world are facing migration issues. Additionally, Human migration is a phenomenon that has existed for a long time. Migration is the activity of people crossing an international border to find a job and resettle. There are two types of migration which are regular and irregular migrations.

Criminal actions of smuggling threaten the capability of the states to protect their own sovereignty, in this manner, lessening the chance of migrants to move to different nations lawfully and safely. Smuggling of Migrants is a dangerous business that can cause many people to death. Almost every country in the globe is affected by the smuggling of migrants, regardless of whether they are an origin, transit or destination country for the smugglers who try to seek for their profit. Moreover, migrants may become victims of crimes during the smuggling activity.

According to Article 3 of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNODC), it defines the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol as the "Procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefits, of the illegal entering of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident and in a way that violates the immigration laws of the target country." (UNODC, 2000, p. 2)

2. The Objective of the study

The objective of the research is to urge migrant workers who want to find jobs in their neighboring countries to be aware of important information about migration before deciding to leave their country.

To provide some recommendation and possible solution to combat the Smuggling of Migrants issues between the two countries.

Background of Cambodian migrant workers

Thailand is a developing and flourished country, of course, in this development, Thailand needs low-skilled foreign workers in various industries and sectors of economic expansion. Since 1993, numbers of low skilled foreign workers in Thailand have grown across the parts of industries and economic sectors. Data show that in 2007, the unemployment rate in Cambodia increased to 0.75%. However, until 2016, the unemployment rate has risen to 0.20% compared to just 0.10% in 2015 (Cambodia Unemployment Rate, n.d, para. 1). It shows that the number of unemployed people in Cambodia remains, which is why many people, especially young people, decide to migrate to find work and earn a higher income. According to the World Bank report in 2010, more than 35,000 Cambodian workers migrated to find a job (Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, 2014, p. 13). The majority of migrants came from rural areas. In order to stay and work legally in Thailand, the workers required to have valid documents such as passport, visa, and work permit and have to register as a legal migrant worker in Thailand. However, most of them choose to migrate illegally with help from the brokers because of lower costs.

The Cambodian migrant workers are divided into two groups. Firstly, migrants who work inside the big city such as Bangkok and other large towns (long-term migrants) in construction sites, restaurants, and so on. Secondly, migrants who work along the Thailand-Cambodia border (short-term migrants) such as farming and agriculture. Additionally, the daily income of construction workers is 140 baht while farm workers only receive 80 baht per day (Sophal & Sovannarith, 1999, pp. 5-7).

There are three reasons that encourage Cambodian worker migration to Thailand. First, they had little chance to earn an income either in their hometown or neighboring areas. Several people said that they would want to work in Cambodia, however, there were nearly no job opportunities except in rice cultivation for a couple of months each year. Second, a difference in the poverty and wage between origin and destination countries also causes migration. As mentioned earlier, many Cambodian populations still live in extreme poverty. The estimated average salary of Cambodian workers in the garment and textile industry is USD\$130 per month from 2014 to 2016 and gradually increased to USD\$182 in 2019 (Tradingeconomics, n.d, para. 1). Meanwhile, in Thailand, they can earn 300 baht a day, twice as much as they can earn from



similar work in Cambodia. Lastly, the poor villagers were motivated by the monetary profits of other migrants from the village in the years prior to the crisis. Nevertheless, moving to work in Thailand was considered the best way to have the capacity to reimburse serious debts (Sophal & Sovannarith, 1999, p. 4).

The context of Undocumented Cambodian Migrants into Thailand

Relating to this, people who illegally cross the border are defined as “Undocumented Migrant.” Additionally, the International Organization of Migration describes undocumented migrants as “Migrant workers or members of their families, who are not permits to enter, to stay or to participate in work service in a destination country.” (Perruchoud & Redpath, 2011, p. 102). Furthermore, smuggled people may become victims of crimes during the smuggling activity. As indicated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), it is assumed that a huge number of Cambodians are smuggled into Thailand’s Border every year, facing many situations of abuse, utilization, and human trafficking (UNODC, 2013a, p. 1). However, Cambodian men who smuggled to Thailand work in dangerous areas such as construction sites and fishing activity.

In 2013, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that 83 percent of undocumented Cambodian migrants, approximately 55,000, are smuggled from Cambodia to Thailand annually (UNODC, 2013b, pp. 12-13), despite the fact that it is difficult to know the correct number of undocumented Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand due to mostly unlawful nature of their movement. Recently, there are 1,050,000 Cambodian migrants entering Thailand while 500,000 of them are undocumented migrant workers.

The main reason why they choose to migration illegally is due to the cost of legal migration through legal channels which follows the legal process according to the MOU between Cambodia and Thailand. The fee for regular migration to process and work in Thailand is around USD\$700. On the other hand, Cambodian migrants pay the brokers only 2,500 baht (US\$80) to 4,000 baht (US\$130) to illegally enter Thailand without any valid documents, which are significantly less than 20,000 baht (US\$700) for legal migration (Bangkok Post, 2014, p. 5,6). Additionally, sometimes they use a border pass to cross the international border. The border pass is a card that can be used to enter only two provinces next to the Thailand border. Furthermore, this card can only be used within seven days and cannot be used to reach Bangkok unless you have a passport. However, there are still cases that some undocumented migrants use this card to reach the city. Beyond this, they use tourism passports to enter Thailand. In fact, those passports can only be used to stay for 14 days in Thailand. After 14 days, they did not come back to renew their entry and still continue to stay in Thailand illegally.

3. Research Methodology

Related to this study, the researcher had conducted the interview through the Cambodian General Counselor in Sa Kaeo Province and the Cambodian migrant workers. There were two methods of approaching to interview the migrant workers. Firstly, the researcher found and contacted the Cambodian General Counselor in Sa Kaeo Province and NGOs for suggestions and to submit requests for conducting the interview with Cambodian migrant workers. Secondly, the researcher requested one of the coworkers of the General Counselor of the Cambodia Royal in Sa Kaeo Province to help lead and introduce the researcher to the Cambodian migrant workers.

This research applied qualitative method which uses both primary and secondary data. The primary data have been acquired using an in-depth interview form with ten undocumented Cambodian migrants in Sa Kaeo Province on February 18, 2018. The interview took about 2 to 3 hours to get the information from the interviewees.

Moreover, the important data were conducted using face-to-face structured interviews with people through participants and relevant people. These interviews were involved with Mr. Ouk Ravuth, the Deputy Director of Employment Agency of Cambodia Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training on August 07, 2018 and His Excellency Lieutenant-General Chiev Phally, Secretary-general of the General Secretariat for Combating Human Trafficking of the Ministry of Interior on August 10, 2018.

Lastly, semi-structured interviews were also conducted to collect the data for this research through the interview with the key players such as NGOs (Legal Support for Children and Women) and the officials who understand the general issues related to this area of the research such as Cambodian Counselor and the



border officers. The interviews were conducted in Khmer language and the interviewer made a note and recorded the answers of the respondents, and these notes were later analyzed and translated to English.

4. Result and Discussion

Push and Pull factors that lead to Cambodians migration to Thailand

The purpose of this section is to present the key findings of the research on the smuggling of Cambodian migrant workers to Thailand by collecting the results from the secondary data such as books, website, journals, and documents, combined with the primary data through in-depth interviews with five main providers of information comprising of ten undocumented Cambodian workers. The results from the interviews are presented in the four research questions as follows.

According to the survey, there are a number of factors driving the growing number of migrant workers. These factors include the lack of livelihoods that the working age has greatly increased, the demographic change, economic, social and political factors, and the wider gap between wages between developed and developing countries, as well as the desire to know or to change the living conditions or environment for some times in the developed countries. These factors have led to the movement of labor from one country to another, from one region to another, or to legally and illegally leaving the country, to the destination country. Most respondents who were interviewed showed that their big expectations for leaving Cambodia to Thailand are to seek for good job opportunities, making them more likely to earn a higher income than domestic jobs. The respondents mentioned the same thing as the main reason why they migrated to Thailand.

“The first time, he entered into Thailand by using border pass, currently, he works at a coffee shop in Sa Kaeo province. He said the reason he decided to work in Thailand was that living conditions and food were affordable, and higher wages than domestic work. His income can support his family, and he always sent money to his family every month. Besides, his boss insured and cared for him well.” (Phanha, 25-year-old, Sa Kaeo)

Table 1 Push and Pull Factors that drive Cambodian migrant workers to migration

Push Factors	Pull Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poverty ▪ Less job opportunities ▪ Living condition ▪ Low income ▪ Discrimination (education, capacity...) ▪ Other economic factors (unemployment rate, debt, disasters, health problems, family crisis...) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The labour force needs in the destination country ▪ Employment opportunities ▪ Bordering countries (easy to travel, language and culture are similar) ▪ Higher income than domestic work (The fishing workers (mostly men) in Thailand can earn 7 times for the same job, seasonal work and construction workers (especially women) can earn 2.5 times for the same job) ▪ Low cost of living Employment and health insurance

How are smuggling people being treated at Cambodia and Thailand border?

According to the research, legal channels cost a lot of money and take a long time, so the majority of migrant workers chose to migrate illegally. They relied on the brokers who used to help their relatives or friends in the past to help them cross the border to work in Thailand. The survey has shown that, in fact, these people do not realize that they are illegally crossing the border due to the brokers inciting that they can help them cross the border faster than the legal migration through their company. In fact, most of the respondents mentioned that this was a reason for illegally crossing the border.

“I recruited illegal cross-border with paid 3,000 baht to the brokers. At first, the smuggler asked me to stay in a guesthouse with about ten other people, and about 1 am, the smugglers let them cross the border by walking through a forested area to wait for the car to reach the destination. The car that I was riding was small and difficult to sit. I take about two days to arrive at destination” (Nouy, 28-year-old, Sa Kaeo)



Human Rights Situations of Migrant Workers

The study found that not only undocumented migrant workers have experienced suffering from human rights abuses but some of the legitimate migrant workers were also subjected to exploitation and abuses of rights from the employers or brokers during the journey or at the arrival at the destination countries. Most of the Cambodian migrant workers who participated in the interview stated that they were satisfied with the work and income they earn while others are dissatisfied with their workplaces and income.

“My friend told me that, working in Thailand can earn a lot of money. But in fact, for two years I was working in Thailand, I got nothing (low wage), and my employers pressured and abused my workforce...” (Sopheak, 23-year-old, Sa Kaeo)

In fact, by living as undocumented migrant workers, they earn less than legal workers and do not get any insurance from the employers.

“Living as an undocumented migrant worker, it is very difficult and needs to escape from the police anytime. Especially I did not receive health insurance from my boss and when I got sick I could not go to the hospital because i am an undocumented migrant worker, so I just bought medicine at the pharmacy near my place.” (Bopha, 30-year-old, Sa Kaeo)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the above explanation and findings, both legally and illegally migration continues to exist. This research has a purpose of understanding the illegal migration of Cambodians to Thailand. Most of the Cambodian undocumented migrant workers do not have sufficient knowledge to understand the timing of the illegal migration. However, migrating to work as a foreign worker has been said by experts that they can benefit only for a short time, but there are many challenges, especially migration without adequate information (illegal migration). Most migrant workers will have to face unemployment when they return to their home country because they do not have a good job as in a country where they migrate to and do not have enough labor market for them. This phenomenon raises concerns that, in the future, Cambodia's unemployment rate will increase dramatically, especially when hundreds of thousands of workers may be forced to return home.

Additionally, living and working as undocumented migrants is not convenient, sometimes it depends on how your employer is. If you are fortunate enough to meet a good employer, they will provide you with accommodation, food, and healthcare service. In contrast, if you, unfortunately, meet some employers who mistreat and abusive, you will be in the image of human trafficking or smuggling.

By the way, Smuggling of Migrants remains a major issue in the region and affects human rights, social, and the environment in the country. Even though both countries have tried to combat the action, it still happens along the border. One of the main points is that the corruption between Cambodia and Thailand controllers which is a main issue of the problem. Smuggling of Migrants issues could not be solved easily if the corrupted officials still facilitate the smugglers. If there is no cooperation from the border authorities, the Smuggling of Migrants process cannot be work and successes.

Recommendations:

There are recommendations from the Cambodia side that this study would like to present. The recommendations from the Cambodia side is to promote and advertise people to seek local jobs before making decisions to migrate as Cambodia's labor market is currently rising. However, over the last few years, the Cambodian government has also been focusing on wages by increasing them year-on-year. Additionally, it should also facilitate by providing a transparent and safe migration and migration information and disseminate with police officers to eliminate the corruption between the brokers and the smuggling networks, as well as the transportation of illegal migrants by strengthening strict laws along the border or small corridors.



6. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Mr Hun Saroeun, Cambodia Consul General in Sa Kaeo Province in helping to facilitate communication with migrant workers to obtain additional data in this research. In particular, I would like to thanks to the Employment Agency of Cambodia Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training and Secretary-general of the General Secretariat for Combating Human Trafficking of the Ministry of Interior for key interviews, as well as other documents related to this research. Finally, thanks to all the committees involved in advisory, feedback, and improvement.

7. Reference:

- Asian Development Bank (ADB). (2014). *Cambodia country poverty analysis 2014* [PDF file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/151706/cambodia-country-poverty-analysis-2014.pdf>
- Bangkok Post. (2014). 106 Illegal migrants caught. *Bangkok Post*, p. 5-6. Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/422787/106-illegal-migrants-caught>
- Cambodia Unemployment Rate. (n.d), Retrieved from: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/cambodia/unemployment-rate>
- Chaisuparakul S. (2015). *Life and community of Cambodian migrant workers in Thai society* [PDF file]. Retrieved from [http://www.jpss.mahidol.ac.th/PDF/JPSS-Vol23\(1\)_Sumaree_Cambodian-Migrants.pdf](http://www.jpss.mahidol.ac.th/PDF/JPSS-Vol23(1)_Sumaree_Cambodian-Migrants.pdf)
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2017). *TRIANGLE II quarterly briefing note* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_550169.pdf
- Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training. (2014). *Labour migration policy for Cambodia* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.colomboprocess.org/images/pdfs/Labour_Migration_Policy_for_Cambodia_2015-18.pdf
- Perruchoud R. & Redpath-Cross J. (2011). Glossary on Migration. *International Organization for Migration*, 2nd ed., p. 102.
- Sophal C. & Sovannarith S. (1999). *Cambodian Labour migration to Thailand: A Preliminary Assessment, Working Paper 11* [PDF file]. Received from <https://www.cdri.org.kh/publication-page-old/pub/wp/wp11e.pdf>
- Tradingeconomics. (n.d). Retrieved from <https://tradingeconomics.com/cambodia/minimum-wages>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2000). *Protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air* [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/smuggling-migrants/SoM_Protocol_English.pdf
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2013a, March 20). Cambodia: Addressing migrant smuggling requires comprehensive coordinated regional action. *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/cambodia/2013/03/migrant-smuggling/story.html>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2013b). *Transnational organized crime in East Asia and the Pacific, A threat assessment*. Retrieved from http://www.unodc.org/res/cld/bibliography/transnational-organized-crime-in-east-asia-and-the-pacific-a-threat-assessment_html/TOCTA_EAP_web.pdf
- Yinglun, S. (2018, May 22). Some 80,000 Cambodian migrant workers still working illegally in Thailand. *Xinhuanet*. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/22/c_137198242.htm