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Migrant kids left in limbo, activists say

Govt urged to relax verification process

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An NGO working on child rights is urging the government to ease regulations to ensure the children of migrant workers are not left stateless.

Addressing a forum yesterday to mark International Migrants Day, which falls today, Save the Children coordinator Warangkhan Mutumon said current laws are threatening the legal status of migrant workers' children.

She pointed particularly to a regulation which requires children's nationality verification processes to be completed by their parents in Thailand.

Ms Warangkhan said this requirement creates problems, as many migrant children here do not live with their parents. They either entered the country by themselves or with other family members, she said.

Once stateless, these children are vulnerable to human trafficking and labour abuse, she added.

"The government should relax the regulation and allow all children of migrant workers to undergo the nationality verification process in their country of origin," Ms Warangkhan said.

Of the 300,000 children of migrant workers currently in Thailand, only about 1%, or 3,335, have undergone nationality verification and are registered, she said. The rest face legal problems and have limited access to education and health care.

According to Save the Children's 2012 annual report on human trafficking, 295 migrant children under the age of 18 in Thailand had fallen victim to human trafficking. They were forced into prostitution, begging or working in sweat shops. Of these, 159 were Myanmar nationals, 63 were from Cambodia and 73 from Laos.

Foundation for Rural Youth assistant director Mongkol Suwansirisilp, however, said there was nothing wrong with the government's policies involving migrant workers. The problems lie instead with enforcement and implementation, he said.

Despite a cabinet resolution in July 2005 guaranteeing education for all children in the country, regardless of registration or nationality, only about 21% of migrant children are registered to receive schooling, he said. He called on the government to issue regulations which will enable these children to transfer their education credits when they return to their home countries.

Adisorn Kerdmongkol, representing an NGO dealing with migrant workers, also voiced concerns about the social security system, saying it is not designed to match the needs of migrants.

Of the 600,000 migrant workers in the country, only 210,000 are enrolled in the social security programme, he said. Those whose enrolment is pending are required to purchase health insurance while they wait, he said. Children aged seven and below can buy policies for 365 baht, but those older than seven must pay full adult prices.

"This is quite a burden for migrant workers," Mr Adisorn said.

Aye Ma Cho, from the Human Rights and Development Foundation, said many migrant workers are paid below the minimum daily wage of 300 baht.

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