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54 Myanmar migrants suffocate in freezer

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- More than 100 migrant workers from Myanmar inside truck freezer
- Of the 67 survivors, some were hospitalized, some were taken to Thai jails
- Myanmar and other regional countries supply Thailand with cheap labor

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BANGKOK, Thailand (CNN) -- The bodies of 54 migrant workers from Myanmar were found Wednesday suffocated in a freezer on the back of a truck, police said.

Torsak Harnsanam, a police officer at Suksumran Police Station in Ranong province in southern Thailand, said a village chief alerted police at 10 p.m. (11 a.m. ET) that he had found the truck.

Police investigated and, in addition to discovering the bodies, found 67 other migrants from Myanmar who were alive inside the freezer, Harnsanam said.

The chief said survivors told him they had tried from inside the freezer to signal the driver, who eventually pulled over, discovered the bodies and fled.

Some survivors were taken to a hospital in a nearby village; others were jailed.

Survivors told police they sneaked into Ranong province from Myanmar's Victoria Point by fishing boat, according to reports from The Associated Press. They were then packed into a small container truck for a trip to Phuket.

Ranong province is located about 467 kilometers (290 miles) south of Bangkok just across from Myanmar's Victoria point. The province is regarded as a major trading route between the two countries, the AP reported.

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Thailand has long depended on inexpensive labor from neighboring countries, including Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, which formerly was known as Burma.

The Thai government allows only a small number of immigrants from those countries, which has led to a number of smuggling cases.

There are about a million Myanmar workers registered to work in Thailand, and an additional million estimated to be in the country illegally to work mostly as laborers, the AP reported.

Some of the Myanmar migrants flee their country to escape armed conflicts between ethnic minority rebels and the Myanmar army, and others for lack of economic opportunity in their impoverished country, one of the poorest in Asia.

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Many of those Myanmar migrants who do make it to Thailand, many illegal workers, wind up being abused by their employers.

The London-based human rights group Amnesty International found in a 2005 report that workers from Myanmar take jobs that Thais consider too dirty, dangerous or demeaning, the AP reported.

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CNN's Kochakorn J. Olarn in Bangkok contributed to this report.

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