

Thailand: Economist, Labor Leader, Monk on TV Panel—Let the Refugees Work!



Left to right: Dr. Anusorn Tamajai, Dean of the Faculty of Economics at Rangsit University; Phra Kittisak Kittisophano of the Metta Dhammaraksa Foundation; and Sawit Kaewwan, Secretary General of the Thai Labor Solidarity Committee. Credit: USCRI

A May broadcast of Thailand's *Bhai Nee Mee Kham Thob* (This Afternoon We Have the Answer), a panel discussion/viewer call-in program, focused on the treatment of refugees and featured the noted economist, spiritual leader, and labor activist above. Moderator Phisarn Dilokwanich introduced the topic noting that:

international NGOs criticize Thailand's ill treatment of refugees compared to that of Malaysia [toward the Acehnese] and the United States because Thailand has kept a large number of refugees in the border areas for decades, despite their potential and ability to work. Thailand is often humiliated when international conferences raise this and Thai delegates are unable to explain it to the international community.

"Refugees," he added "can't go shopping like us or to the movies, let alone shop at Tesco Lotus."

Phra Kittisak added:

They are like prisoners with a life sentence. They will be outlaws if they leave the camp. This gives corrupt officials the chance to abuse them. ... If you ask me what the standard of living of refugees who were born and stay in camp for 24 years is, it is worse than that of prisoners in jails.

Dr. Anusorn spoke on the effects for Thailand of keeping them in camps for 20 years and said:

we should allow refugees to work and be economically self-sufficient. On their own legs financially, they would want more education. If economically and educationally stronger, these refugees can help change the situation in Myanmar when they repatriate. ... If we treat them well, we will have friends in the neighboring country when they return home. If our friends in neighboring countries are happy and have good standard of living, that will affect us positively



“[P]roblems occur because we deprive [the refugees] of their rights. If we allowed them their rights and better living standards, they can be part of our society.”

too. ... Malaysia, for example, gave refugees from Aceh the right to work by giving them work permits and it still could administer them well. As you can see, the security is still there, while refugees are self-sufficient and work with dignity.

Sawit added:

these people can help strengthen our economic growth. But the problem is that they are overlooked and left behind in an undeveloped state. The most important thing is that they get the right to work, fair wages, and freedom of movement, because these are basic.

When a caller from Chiang Mai said that refugees commit crimes and trespass on other people's land, Phra Kittisak, from the same region, replied, "These problems occur because we deprive them of their rights. If we allowed them their rights and better living standards, they can be part of our society."

Anusorn concluded:

the right to work and freedom of movement of refugees are basic rights, and it is time that refugees in Thailand should enjoy them as they do in many other countries. This will benefit both refugees and Thailand, especially on its economy. I am on the boards of many companies and enterprises in many sectors, especially industry, complain of labor shortages. Refugees can help fill the gap and move the economy which will benefit all Thais. We can love our nation, we can care for the majority of our countrymen, but the most important thing is that we should not be narrow-minded.

“The most important thing is that [the refugees] get the right to work, fair wages, and freedom of movement, because these are basic.”



“[E]nterprises in many sectors, especially industry, complain of labor shortages. Refugees can help fill the gap and move the economy.”



Taking Action • THAILAND