Identity Crisis
Headline  Life & Styles  2008-08-01 14:46

Lack of citizenship deprives hilltribe people of access to education, jobs, healthcare and basic rights.

Lack of citizenship and ID cards is the basic reason why up to three million hilltribe and ‘stateless’ people live in abject poverty, a major survey has found.

The three-year study by the bureau of social development and Unesco confirms that highland people, many of them spread across the north of Thailand, suffer a huge disparity in access to education, health, credit, the right to buy land and vote.

American anthropologist and trafficking expert for Unesco, David Feingold, who has worked in Thailand on and off for more than 40 years, said lack of citizenship and identity documents such as birth certificates made hilltribe people highly vulnerable to human trafficking.

It is the single biggest factor in the exploitation of hilltribe girls and drives highland men to crimes such as drug-smuggling because of their inability to travel to find work, he says.

"With no citizenship there is nothing else we can choose: all the roads are closed."

"There are a lot of migrants who have been living here in Thailand much longer than Khun Thaksin’s (referring to former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra) family, but they never got registered because original surveys never went up into the hills, and a lot of policies were never written in these people’s original languages," he said.

Former Chiang Rai province senator Tuenjai Deetes said previous administrations had recognised the problem and devised strategies and new laws to try to grant legal status to hilltribe people and their children, but interior ministry officials had difficulty telling ‘newcomers’ from neighbouring countries such as Burma, from tribal people who had lived in Thailand for generations. Plus the laws were complex, and some officials simply had a ‘bad attitude’.

A national strategy announced in 2005 by the Thaksin government after Thai King Bumibhol Adulyadej expressed concern about the problem resulted in policies to help stateless children get education. About 50,000 students have been given ID cards in recent years to help them go to school and travel to towns to study.
The new nationality law will also allow the interior minister to grant citizenship to groups, not just individuals.

Chutima Morlæ-kul (Miju), an Akha expert on legal status and minority rights, said a key problem was that tribal people didn't know their rights.

"We have suggested the government should host seminars and training for officials so they know what they're doing. In the field they often give rein to their own prejudice and bias in their work," she said.

"Tribal people in the 20 provinces in the North (mountainous Thailand region) are only asking for their basic rights.

"Some are struggling to prove status and have to resort to bribery, but even with all the bribes the (citizenship) process can take 10 years! "Some of us have given up and just turned to prostitution, male and female, because the process is so time-consuming. With no citizenship there is nothing else we can choose: all the roads are closed."

Statistical analyst Amanda Flaim said researchers had interviewed 63,000 people in 192 villages in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son provinces.

The findings showed the respondents were highly disadvantaged in regard to access to education. Only 22 per cent went to upper primary school and just 8 per cent went to lower high school.

"The degree of disadvantage is very acute," she said.

Feingold said the situation was probably even worse than the survey indicated, as researchers were not allowed to go to about 700 villages in special military zones along the border. Rates of citizenship and access to education and services are probably even lower in these villages, he said. (By JIM POLLARD In Bangkok/ Daily Express/ AsiaNews)