Plight of the hill tribes

Education needed in struggle to empower hill tribe communities

DANIEL CALDERBANK

Deprived of an education, many hill tribe people in Thailand are locked in a battle to escape arrest, deportation, extortion and other forms of abuse, human rights experts claim.

Ms Chutima Morlaeku ("Mijiu"), an Akha expert on the legal status of hill tribe people and minority rights who has worked with Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), said that without an education, tribal people cannot empower their communities.

"They need to educate themselves so that they know what their basic rights are," she said.

"Knowing your rights does not guarantee that you can access them, but not knowing your rights guarantees that you can't."

The education issue is seen as double-edged. Ms Chutima said government officials also need to be educated about the plight of the hill tribe people they come into close contact with.

"We have suggested that the government should host seminars and training for officials so they know what they are doing. The officers need to understand the relevant laws and the impact they have on hill tribes.

"In the field, they often use their own prejudice and bias to do their work," she said.

The issue was raised recently at a Unesco interactive panel on the impact of legal status on hill tribes in Thailand.
Unesco statistical analyst Amanda Flaim said the Unesco Highland Peoples Survey studied a sample group of 192 border villages in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son provinces to determine the impact of a person's legal status (citizenship and birth registration) on access to social services, education, health care, land tenure, and agricultural credit.

Interviews with 63,719 people make it the largest household survey of its type in Thailand.

A study of a sample group revealed 38 percent of hill tribe people do not have Thai citizenship.

Compared to highlanders with Thai citizenship, those lacking citizenship are 73 percent less likely to enter primary school and 98 percent less likely to progress to higher education.

Similarly, highlanders who lack birth registration, a status which is not exactly congruous with citizenship, are 64 percent less likely to enter lower primary school and 85 percent less likely to enter secondary school relative to highlanders with official Thai birth registration.

"The degree of disadvantage is very acute," Ms Flaim said.

Dr David A Feingold, Unesco International Coordinator for HIV and Trafficking Programmes, said the situation is probably more critical as researchers were not given access to an estimated 700 villages in special military zones along border areas, suggesting lower rates of access to education.

He said: "Unesco research has identified 'lack of citizenship' as the greatest risk factor for highland girls and women in Thailand to be trafficked, or otherwise exploited."

Consequently, Unesco, in cooperation with the British Embassy, initiated the UK government-funded Highland Birth and Citizenship Registration Promotion Project.

The objective of this project is to promote birth registration and citizenship awareness among highland minorities in Thailand through the development and dissemination of research-based, culturally appropriate indigenous language materials.

The British Embassy has agreed to finance the second phase of the programme.

Human rights lawyer Surapong Kongchantuk estimates that there are three million people considered stateless or undocumented in Thailand. Many were born in the Kingdom after fleeing persecution in Burma.

"There are a lot of migrants who have been living here in Thailand much longer than [ex-Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s] family, but they were never registered because the original census surveys never got up into the hills. And a lot of policies were never translated into these people’s original languages," said Dr Feingold.

Surapong said lawyers and education officials have produced guidelines on how undocumented children could get an education.

After His Majesty the King expressed a concern about the problem, the Thaksin-led administration announced a strategy in 2005 to help the stateless.

An estimated 50,000 students have been given identity cards in recent years to help them go to school and travel to different towns to study.

But the majority need official permission to travel outside their local area, and approval is granted by the district chief on a case-by-case basis.

Devoid of an education and unaware of their rights and how to gain Thai citizenship, many hill tribe people are likely to be forced into illegal activities in order to survive, such as drug dealing and prostitution.

This results in arrests, fuels the prejudices of the majority community and prevents many true natives of Thailand from obtaining their legal rights as citizens.

Without an education to increase awareness of and to secure their legal rights, the sinister cycle rolls on.
A new booklet, the Manual for Capacity-building on Birth Registration and Citizenship in Thailand, provides a better understanding of the regulations governing the legal status of people residing in Thailand. The Thai-language publication, with a translation in English on CD, can be obtained by emailing k.chotika@unescobkk.org.

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