PRECARIOUS MIGRATION
VOICES OF UNDOCUMENTED CAMBODIAN MIGRANTS

Thailand
Bangkok

Cambodia
Acknowledgements

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Thailand

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WELCOME TO THAILAND

open up

On your way
We’ve arrived mama. How are the children?

What a relief! They’re fine, sleeping... did you meet your brother ok?

We’re in Lo’s room. We met our cousin ok, she will stay with us. I miss my children.

Lo never phones me! When can you start work? I’ll look after your children darling, don’t worry.

We start work tomorrow. I’ll send money next week for Baba’s milk... when we’re paid.

I can use my savings till then. Be careful, don’t make friends or mess around, just work... and stay with your brother.

This is a new site for me, I hope the boss is ok. The last site owner was very kind.

But Lo, how will I know what to do?

You’ll be painting walls, it’s not difficult. Just follow the person next to you.
One week later

Well little sister and cousin how have you liked your first week?

Good, my hands are blistered—but it's nice to have a shower with running water... and 24 hour electricity!

...and an electric rice maker is so much better than collecting wood to make a fire... collecting water from the pond... just to cook rice.

Yeah everyday living is good, but I miss the village views... if that's mama will you answer?

Mama?

Why doesn't Lo answer? That is his phone! Srey, I've run out of formula milk for Baba, can you send me money?

I haven't had my wage yet. Lo said the last boss paid weekly, but he thinks this one pays monthly.

I've got a bit of money from the market sales, but not too long eh?

I'll give him rice milk instead... it's cheaper.

I really want to make this work Lo! Phuoc and her husband worked for just two years, paid back all the loans and saved enough to build a house in the village.

Yes, but they had a good boss, who protected them from being arrested and treated them fairly.
4 weeks later

I miss our children. Do you think they are alright with my mother?

Yes, your mother is a good woman and we’re doing this to make our lives better. Shall we take a break?

Do you think we’ll be paid tomorrow?

Yes...the boss wants to separate our group and send your cousin to another site next week.

NO! We can’t let that happen! She’s a single girl in our protection...did you tell the boss that?

Yes and I asked Lo to speak to him too.

Did you borrow more money from the foreman for food?

Yes
6 Weeks later Cambodian village market

How are Stey and her husband getting on in Thailand?

Good, but no money’s come back yet—they haven’t been paid for six weeks.

And your son? I heard workers were shot dead when police raided a construction site.

I don’t sleep at night with worry—I think of the horror we knew during Pol Pot’s regime...I feel sick it’s happening again.

My son also hasn’t been paid. Mind you, I haven’t seen a penny from him in two years.

Ahh, he’s a good boy, and that isn’t true—he gives you money when he comes home.

He should be married...He asked me to find him a wife...I found a lovely girl...Then he went away to work and when he returned he said he wasn’t ready to marry. Now every time he comes home he’s wearing make up. He shows no interest in marriage.

Here! Feel this baby! Do you think he has fever?

That baby is burning up. He needs medicine quickly!
I just don’t have the money... I gave him herb medicine, but it hasn’t worked.

So borrow from the lender! The boy needs a modern doctor...

Why don’t you apply for a Microfinance loan... tell them you want to buy more chickens... to expand your business. Then pay off the money lender, it’s the cheapest way.

What if they check up on me?

Show them some chickens you’ve already raised and tell them your plan to get more to sell at market... GET THE MEDICINE!

It’s not right... even my single niece is working there. Unthinkable ten years ago!

Yes, but she’s protected, she’s with your son.

Oh dear I’m worried about borrowing from the private lender. The repayments are very high.

If the money doesn’t come from my children, I can’t meet the repayments from selling vegetables here.

The lender will take away my small plot of land and then we will have nothing.

You should think about getting a microfinance loan.
The next day

Can you transfer money to mama tomorrow Lo?...it’s not much though is it, after the boss deducted for rent. He said it was included...

Yeah...he changed his mind when we refused to separate from our cousin.

At least mama could buy medicine and we can pay back the debts soon enough.

This boss seems ok, he’s offered cousin protection if the site is raided.

There’s risk, but nothing like Pol Pot, which is what mama knew. We’ve chosen to come here to get a better life.

Oh Lo, it’s so dangerous.

MAMA MAMA, WHAT’S THE MATTER? WHAT’S HAPPENED?

It’s Baba...he’s sick...I’m sorry...I gave him medicine...I’m sorry.

What’s wrong with him?

He’s got fever. Doctor says it’s a virus and he’ll be OK, but I’m so afraid.
We heard the Thai police were coming. The boss told us to run away.

We hid until after dark... Don’t you think we should just run away back to the village? I’m scared...

But the boss owes us money, we haven’t been paid for three weeks.

Boss said to come back after dark, that he’d talk to the police.

Huh, and deduct the cost from our wages, I bet.

Does that mean he’ll pay the police to leave us alone?

I heard that bosses call the police to come and arrest us so we run away and they don’t have to pay us.

We returned to the site in the middle of the night.

I was so frightened! We’ve heard terrible rumours about what happens if you’re caught.

Be careful! Go nowhere alone! You must come home! I’m scared. Your children need you! This reminds me of Khmer Rouge time, when parents were apart from their children. If we can’t repay the loans, we’ll eat rice and salt, but your children mustn’t lose their parents!
Very early the next day

Mama, it's so early! What's the matter?

I'm afraid for you. Come home! It's too dangerous. Please come home, I need you! Your children need you! It's not safe!

Leave me in peace! I am honest I've never cheated anyone.
The foreman says the soldiers are coming tomorrow. There's a crackdown on people without passports.

I think we should leave.

Hey cousin, didn't boss offer you protection?

Last week, he said if the site is raided he'll make sure I'm not arrested.

That's good, but stick with the people I introduced you to.

And all of you carry your money with you at all times.

No way! SOLDIERS!

RUN!

when it's quiet let's get the train as Lo suggested

Where is Lo?

I'm sorry... I saw the police take him

Oh no... what will happen to him?

He'll be fine, he has money and speaks some Thai too

Can we get our stuff first?

I think it's too risky...
Make sure your money is hidden, put it in your bra and pockets... keep a little in your purse...

...When you get on the train, men will ask you for money... they will look like police but they are criminals

Greet them with Thai greeting... like this...

And say you have no money. Pay the guards when you get on, but that's all

I've arranged car transport over the border. We must leave now. It will be uncomfortable but safe

It's really crowded, isn't it?

Yes, apparently there's a big market everyone goes to every Tuesday

Cool, sounds great for photos

Your travel fee please

I have no money
We travelled in a pickup across the border via a secret road. It was uncomfortable, but we arrived safely in Cambodia and soon got to the village. The family was reunited in the village. To have you all home is like taking a thorn from my heart.
I hear boss got you a work permit card cousin?

Yes it’s expensive, he’s deducting it from my pay. He said if you three come back he’ll organise passports and permits.

The neighbour suggested I apply for a microfinance loan to pay back the private money lender.

and that we could use some of the money towards your return transportation costs.

and to get passports and work documents so that you are legal.

My friends sold all their land to pay for a passport to migrate legally and avoid arrest.

but they were cheated and ended up migrating illegally.

and if that happens and we are forced to return how will we pay back mama’s loan?

I only want to go if we can have work documents. If we apply here in Cambodia it will take too long.

...if we do it in Thailand, boss will pay for it and deduct it from our pay so it’s easier.

But maybe the money would be better used to cultivate our land and lead a better life here with our family.

The Cambodian government should take care of citizens and help us with the migration process.
About the Project

In May 2014 the Thai military initiated a coup and ousted the civilian government. In June that year, the new government issued a statement warning all undocumented migrants that they should leave the country or face arrest and deportation. In response to this, over a two week period in June 2014, it is estimated that close to 220,000 undocumented Cambodian migrants fled the country.

We had been working in Cambodian villages close to the Thai-Cambodian border since September 2013. We were struck by the number of families that had one or more members migrating in search of work to support their family. In discussing this phenomenon with colleagues in Cambodia and at the University of Sussex, a research proposal was developed that aimed to explore the dynamics of migration and relations within the household and the contribution that migration made to livelihoods. We were particularly interested in the impact that the involuntary return had on migrants and their families.

This comic represents one of the ways in which we share the stories of migrants and their families with a broad audience that goes beyond the academic community. We hope that this comic will contribute to readers’ understandings of the challenges and opportunities that migrants face. We hope that this will stimulate discussion and raise awareness of the issues with governments, organisations working with migrants, and the wider public.

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