

STATELESS PEOPLE

Hundreds join 300km march in bid to reclaim nationality



About 200 stateless people from Ranong and Prachuap Khiri Khan walk to Bangkok to demand that parliament pass a law to grant them Thai nationality. SOMCHAI POOMLARD

ACHARA ASHAYAGACHAT

SAMUT SAKHON: About 300 stateless people deprived of Thai nationality are marching more than 300 kilometres to Bangkok to protest against their lack of official recognition.

The march, comprising Buddhist and Muslim villagers from Ranong and Prachuap Khiri Khan, began on Jan 13 at the Singkorn Thai-Burmese border checkpoint in Prachuap Khiri Khan, about 320 kilometres south of Bangkok.

The villagers have taken turns each day to walk, hand out pamphlets and talk to more than 20,000 passers-by about their difficulties. They arrived yesterday in Bangkok's neighbouring province of Samut Sakhon.

Despite heat, dust and restless nights, the villagers, young and old, remain steadfast and in good spirits.

Ten representatives, accompanied by prominent human rights activist Tuenjai Deetes, met Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva yesterday in Bangkok to seek government support for a draft bill to be submitted to parliament.

"We hope the policy makers will understand us," said 66-year-old Kanit Saengsakul, who joined the march with his son-in-law.

"We were born along the Tanao Sri [Tenasserim] mountain range before the British and Siamese kingdoms determined the borderline [dividing Thailand from Burma]."

Mr Kanit is one of tens of thousands of Thais now living in Tak, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon, Ranong and Phangnga without any documentation.

They are descendants of Siamese who moved to what is now Burma before the redrawing of the map 143 years ago.

A-e-cha Kaewnoparat, 20, from Ranong, said the displaced Thais had been striving for state recognition of their citizenship for 10 years.

"Now is considered a crucial step for a bill, drafted particularly for us," he said. The bill is listed for the present parliamentary session.

The draft bill was proposed by a group of Democrat MPs led by Kraisak Choonhavan, after years of study by activists, the National Human Rights Committee, academics and local villagers.

Hasiyah Chansamut, 48, also from Ranong, said she was born on Koh Song, or Kawthaung, now in Pokpian district of Burma, which was a major centre of Thai people for centuries.

"We've applied for citizenship several times in the past decade but the officials refused, saying we're not entitled to it," Ms Hasiyah said.

"Why not? We are Thai. Why can't we reclaim our nationality?"

Ms Hasiyah is marching with her four brothers and sisters, none of whom has an identification card.

Ms A-e-cha explained that the marchers were not migrant workers who sought legal status for their own benefits, but for factual recognition and dignity.

"We speak the same southern dialect, we perform *ta-lung* [Thai shadow plays] and *no-rah* [Southern traditional dance], too. Why are we not treated like other Thais?" she asked.

Ms A-e-cha said she had completed Prathom 6 (Grade 6) but she could not further her studies because of her lack of an ID card and household registration booklet.

The stateless Thais were given temporary cards issued by provincial governors but cannot travel without permission.

Thirawuth Senakham, an associate professor at Walailak University's faculty of arts, said there were strong cultural and historical links to prove the identification of these displaced Thais.

"Security officials should also soften their doubts over any possible links between these Muslims and any violence in the deep South," Mr Thirawuth said.

"We've worked with these people for nearly 10 years and do not find this dimension at all."

Permsak Makarabhirom, of Mahidol University's Center for Peace Building and a member of the National Reform Committee, said it was time the govern-

ment and wider society listened to the plight of these people.

"They are seeking nothing but equal treatment — just a simple law that will give life to them and their descendants," said Mr Permsak, who joined the march yesterday.

"This should be for the benefit of politicians, too. They will feel grateful to you in light of the coming election."

 **Follow the march by logging on to bangkokpost.com/multimedia.**