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Kav LaOved and Physicians for Human Rights Israel release a new study uncovering widespread violations to migrant agricultural workers' right to health in Israel

Israeli agriculture employs around 23,000 migrant workers from Thailand as well as an estimated four thousand workers from other developing countries who come to Israel on work/study programs. Their work is extremely hard: they live on isolated farms and frequently work long hours in extreme weather conditions, engaged in tedious, demanding and at times dangerous manual labor. They are often provided with sub-standard accommodations.

The new report "*A Land Devouring its Workers: Neglect and Violations of Migrant Agricultural Workers' Right to Health in Israel*" highlights widespread violations of the right to health suffered by Thai migrant workers during their employment in Israel.¹ The report reviews gaps in the workers' access to medical care, adequate accommodations, and acceptable environmental, social and working conditions. Report findings are based on a series of surveys conducted among Thai migrant workers and on direct testimonies given by individual workers themselves.²

A difficult picture

The picture emerging from the report is a difficult one:

- Only 50% of Thai workers in Israel have their health card in their possession and can independently access health services.
- Of those workers who sought medical treatment in Israel, 44% did not understand the doctor and/or medical staff because there was no translation.
- Nearly 90% of workers are employed in jobs defined as hazardous, but only 33% of them are provided with compulsory protective equipment by their employer.
- Almost 60% of workers were injured while working, and 93% suffer from ongoing health problems related to their work.
- Nearly 46% of workers suffer from mental distress.
- Nearly 50% of workers continue to work when they are sick, as many as 70% do not receive any payment for sick days.

The high mortality rate among these workers, for reasons other than work accidents, is yet further evidence of the tremendous damage done to Thai migrant workers in the agriculture industry. In 2019, 23 workers from Thailand died, and in 2020 (until August), 14 more Thai workers died in Israel. These are young workers who arrive in Israel after undergoing comprehensive medical tests confirming their good health. And yet, the mortality rate of Thai workers in Israel is three times that of Israeli citizens of the same age.

The Covid-19 crisis has further illustrated the consequences of creating isolated enclaves of marginalized and underprivileged populations without regular access to community health

Services. Since the outbreak of the crisis in Israel, the barriers described above have put migrant workers, as well as the overall society in Israel, at additional serious public health risks.

Main issues of concerns and recommendations for change

The report identifies a variety of issues requiring urgent intervention by the authorities. It also offers a list of recommendations for ensuring the right of agricultural workers to health and reducing the extent of the harm they suffer.

1. Thai workers, who in most cases only speak Thai, have no access to translation services when seeking medical care, which undermines the quality of the health services they receive. The report calls for translation services to be provided to workers accessing health services, and insurance policies and health declarations to be translated into Thai.
2. Workers are also exposed to many safety and health hazards, such as pesticides, work at heights, work with livestock and work with vehicles and heavy tools, often without access to legally required protections. The report recommends introducing periodic health tests to monitor the effects among migrant workers in agriculture of working with hazardous materials.
3. Mental distress, suicidal ideation and drug use are widespread, yet workers have no right to mental health services. The report urges to include mental health services in the migrant workers' health policies. Social services should oversee also the workers' living conditions and be available to offer assistance to workers who suffer from violence, including sexual violence.
4. In areas targeted by rocket fire during escalations in conflict, recently in the Gaza area, employers often require workers to continue working in the fields or in the farm, without a shelter, even when this is forbidden by the Israeli Home Front Command. This has resulted in many injuries and deaths among workers. The report demands that shelters be made available to all workers located near combat zones.
5. Authorities have transferred responsibility for the health of workers to employers and private insurance companies, without supervision or law enforcement in practice. The report urges public authorities to significantly increase their supervision and enforcement efforts in the agricultural sector, particularly regarding safety and health regulations and minimum accommodations standard. In addition, in light of the pervasive rights violations and their impact on workers, the report demands that enforcement efforts achieve real deterrence also by imposing sanctions on employers committing violations, including revocation of their permits to employ migrant workers.

¹ The full report, currently only available in Hebrew, can be accessed [here](#).

² Kav LaOved has released in 2020 two additional reports describing widespread violations suffered by Thai migrant workers in Israeli agriculture: [2020 Snapshot: Migrant Workers from Thailand in Israeli Agriculture](#) and [People Live Here: Violations of Thai Agricultural Migrant Workers Rights to Adequate Accommodation](#).