



## After the tsunami: who are the winners and losers?



The Boxing Day 2004 tsunami killed more than 8,000 people in Thailand, including foreign holidaymakers and local people. Among the places badly hit, Phuket has made an amazing recovery. The tourism industry on the island has bounced back, with the last traces of the damage caused by the giant waves already replaced by new luxury hotels and resorts. The tourists are back too, including the Beckhams in the summer of 2007.

Billions of dollars have been poured into Phuket's beach locations, much of it from overseas investors like the international hotel chains, Hyatt and Shangri-La. There are 17 five star hotels under construction. All this new money has sparked an explosion in land values, pricing many original residents out of the market.

The situation for Phuket's migrant workers, especially from neighbouring Burma, is worse. Before the tsunami there were about 73,000 registered Burmese migrants in the area, but combined with illegal workers the real number

was probably double that.

No-one knows how many of them were killed by the tsunami. Family accounts put the number of dead Burmese workers at more than a thousand, but official figures only record nine among the 5,395 lives lost in the area. Instead of receiving help many took to the hills in spite of suffering injury, hunger and trauma. They were also torn by grief, not knowing what happened to their loved ones and unable to find out for fear of arrest and deportation.

Ao, a Burmese man working on Phuket, survived the tsunami but not the police crackdown that followed. Just five days after the tsunami Ao was arrested by the police along with four of his friends, accused of looting. According to him, the police forced them to confess that the TV set and electric fans in their rented room were stolen.

Phuket still relies on migrant labour to re-build the island. For migrants like Ao, Phuket is still a better option than returning to Burma, ruled by a military dictatorship for more than forty years.