

ETHNIC MINORITIES / KAREN NEW YEAR CELEBRATION

Hundreds arrested at huge migrant gathering

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Nakhon Pathom _ More than 600 Karen labourers, most with legal work permits, were arrested while attending a traditional New Year celebration in the compound of the Police Cadet School in Nakhon Pathom's Sam Phran district yesterday.

Police had expected only a few hundred to attend the celebration, and instead faced a crowd estimated at 70,000.

Police said 183 of the 674 arrested Karen had no documents at the time of their arrest. They were all attending a celebration organised by Niroon Sukkrai, 30, a migrant worker.

While the other labourers had legal work permits, issued for Bangkok and nearby provinces, they were arrested because as registered migrant workers they were not allowed to travel out of their designated areas, police said. Sam Phran is about 40km west of Bangkok.

The workers may be deported for breaking the law, police said.

Mr Niroon said he was granted permission to organise the event, which included a traditional rite.

In past years, the annual ceremony was held at Catholic missionary schools in Nakhon Pathom. This year it had been moved to the police school compound as the Catholic schools were occupied.

A Police Cadet School official confirmed that it allowed Mr Niroon to use the place.

"They just told us they would invite friends to a ceremony which included a soccer match. We estimated there would be about 200 _ not 70,000 alien workers," said Pol Col Padsanong Boonyakiet, deputy director of the Police Cadet School.

The huge gathering caused panic among neighbours, who phoned the police.

Surapong Kongchantuk, an advocate for ethnic minority rights, said the police over-reacted.

"The police are out of their minds. They arrested these people during a traditional ceremony. This is tantamount to arresting Muslims while they are on the haj," said Mr Surapong, vice-president of a human rights panel under the Lawyers Council of Thailand.

Police should have taken a lenient approach since most of the Karen actually have work permits, and Sam Phran is close to Bangkok.

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