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- General News
- Business
- Sports
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- Database
- Horizons
- Motoring
- RealTime
- Perspective
- Asia Focus
- Your Money
- Learning Post
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- Front Page Prints
- Forum
- Recent Editions
- Poll
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- Hotel Reservations
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General news >> Thursday November 22, 2007

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COMMENTARY

Gen Sonthi hits out at pregnant women

Sanitsuda Ekachai

Is it a manly thing to do to subject pregnant women to unsafe delivery? Gen Sonthi

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Boonyaratkalin must answer this question before he launches his efforts to deport pregnant migrant workers.

The leader of the Sept 19, 2006 coup and current deputy prime minister in charge of national security, may think the deportation plan is part of military toughness. But the whole world - and anyone with a heart - will see this as plain cruelty. Gen Sonthi revealed this inhumane plan last week after visiting Samut Sakhon, where migrant workers from Burma have flocked to serve the thriving fishing industry.

More babies from the migrant population is a serious threat to national security, he said, because they would intensify social and public health problems as well as giving the authorities more headaches in the future by demanding a variety of rights, including citizenship.

Who cares if these pregnant women will have to face persecution and be subject to unsafe delivery procedures in Burma? Who cares if many of them will end up dead?

Who cares if the crackdown on pregnant women will push the

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whole migrant population deeper underground, which will aggravate public health and crime problems while intensifying the use of slave labour?

Apart from threatening to deport all pregnant migrant workers, the general also issued an order prohibiting migrant workers from organising all cultural activities or forming groups among themselves.

Who cares if the order violates basic morality, human rights and the 2007 charter blessed by the junta?

What is more important to Gen Sonthi now is to show his toughness when his political stature is at its most insecure.

If it so happens that he has to use women at their weakest during pregnancy to pay for his tough-guy image, then so be it.

Gen Sonthi's use of the ultra-nationalist and racist card should come as no surprise because it strikes a chord with the public's distrust of Burma, thanks to our ethno-centric history that fosters hatred against neighbouring countries.

The big irony, however, is that Gen Sonthi himself is a Muslim, and his being part of an ethnic minority has totally failed to instill in him any cultural sensitivity and empathy for the ethnically oppressed.

He should find time to mull over this question: Would his ancestors have had the chance to live, work and prosper in Thailand - thereby one day allowing him the opportunity to rise to the top of the military hierarchy - if governments in days of old, fraught with racist fears, had driven away pregnant women in the migrant population?

As a crossroads for people from various ethnicities, our society has long benefited from openness to migrants who brought with them new skills, knowledge and cultural richness which, over time, have helped us navigate through modern challenges to grow in peace and prosperity.

Gen Sonthi has benefited from this openness. So have many other policy-makers. As have many of us. Yet we have forgotten our roots. By choosing the path of oppression, we have not only shut our hearts to compassion, but also our country's doors to peace and growth in the globalised world.

Blinded by ethno-centric nationalism and true to the yes-sir spirit, the Samut Sakhon governor is reportedly set to follow Gen Sonthi's order to deport pregnant migrant workers.

Public signs in Mon or Burmese languages will be prohibited. As for group gatherings, only those for Buddhist ceremonies will be allowed.

As Buddhists, we must ask ourselves if this is in line with the Buddha's teachings, for us to cling fiercely to the violent views of racism and nationalism, to fill our hearts with hatred, and shape our policies accordingly?

Gen Sonthi, as a Muslim, must also probe his own soul and see if his deportation plan violates the Prophet's teachings on how to treat pregnant women and nursing mothers.

After all, we must answer to our God. If not, then to our conscience at least.

Sanitsuda Ekachai is Assistant Editor (Outlook), Bangkok Post.



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