

Statelessness: Highland People in Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Northern Thailand is comprised of a diverse society of highland ethnic groups known as “*chao khao*” scattered throughout the highland areas. There are approximately 3,500 highland ethnic villages in 20 provinces that contain about 165,000 households with a population of 923,257. The major demographic breakdown is Karen (46 percent), Hmong (17 percent) and Lahu (11 percent). Each group has its own unique language, dress, tradition, religion and history. However, they face segregation and discrimination as marginalized and politically powerless minorities because the Thai government has categorized many of them as stateless people. As of today, approximately one-third of the 2.5 million stateless people in Thailand are thought to be highland ethnicity.

From Thailand’s first passage of the Nationality Act of 1965, hundreds of thousands of highland people were declared “alien.” The Nationality Act barred many highland people from access to Thai citizenship. This act only granted citizenship to people who were born in Thailand and were able to prove that their parents were Thai citizens prior to the time they were born. Without citizenship, highland people are restricted from social and political participation that will increase their chance of survival as Thai nationals. They are unable to secure legal work, have no access to education and basic healthcare, are unable to travel between provinces and abroad, and cannot obtain basic legal rights and achievement certificates. This paper explores the effect of Thai government policies and integration strategies imposed on the highland people since the 1950s.