



Study: Refugees and asylum seekers prone to mental illness

Posted on 26 July 2011 - 05:35pm

Last updated on 26 July 2011 - 05:57pm

Meena L. Ramadas

newsdesk@thesunday.com

KUALA LUMPUR (July 26, 2011): Refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced forced labour are prone to suffer from depression, anxiety and stress, a study by NGO Health Equity Initiatives (HEI) revealed today.

The research was conducted on 1,074 Burmese refugees and asylum seekers living in the Klang Valley and showed that a third of respondents had experienced forced labour.

Also, 70% of 1,037 respondents had symptoms of depression and anxiety while 41% of the respondents displayed symptoms of stress.

In revealing the research findings today, HEI director Sharuna Verghis said today: "Although forced labour occurs in all work sectors, the construction and agriculture or plantation sectors had a higher proportion of forced labour."

"The risk of unemployment was associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress," she added.

According to the International Labour Organisation's Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour 1930, forced or compulsory labour includes "all work or service which a person did not volunteer for and under the menace of any penalty".

According to the findings, out of 1,037 respondents, 21.4% of respondents showed symptoms of mild depression, 33.5% displayed symptoms of moderate depression, 8.7% were severely depressed and 5% exhibited extremely severe depression.

On anxiety, 11.1% of 1,037 respondents showed a mild level, 29.4% were moderate, 14.1% were severe and 14% were extremely severe.

On stress, 18.8% showed a mild level, 15% displayed a moderate level, 5.8% had severe stress while 1.5% had extremely severe stress levels.

The findings of the research were deduced from Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) questionnaires.

At a press conference later, Sharuna said it is imperative that the Government recognise the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees to ensure easier access to medical facilities.

HEI director Dr Xavier Pereira said the findings indicate a "serious problem" as prolonged stress, depression and anxiety can cause permanent structural and chemical changes in the brain.

"If we don't look at preventive measures or interventions to reduce forced labour, then there are serious health implications," he said.

"Refugees and asylum seekers have the least access to healthcare in the country," he added.

Bar Council sub-committee on migrants, refugees and immigration affairs chairman Datuk M. Ramachelvam said the "irregular status and uncertain status of undocumented persons and more so refugees contributes to negative medical and psychological conditions."

He said the Government should abolish the outsourcing for labour.

"It has no place in the labour market," he said, adding there are 100,000 refugees that can be employed in the country but present laws prohibit such employment.