

Meetee's Story

September 2018

MEETEE SAT IN A CROWDED GOVERNMENT OFFICE, waiting for her name to be called. Her bright, handstitched clothing—the traditional dress of her hill tribe—creates a stark contrast against the mist hovering heavy over the mountains of Northern Thailand.

Waiting seemed to be a way of life in the rural hills of Northern Thailand, and Meetee had perfected it. She has waited for more than thirty years to receive her ID card, her proof of Thai citizenship. Finally, on this rainy September morning, Meetee would receive the small piece of paper that would unlock her from life as a stateless woman, and free her from decades of fear.

Meetee was 49 years old when her application for Thai citizenship was initially approved, but her ID card, her proof of citizenship, never arrived. That was more than 30 years ago.

“Because I do not have citizenship, I am so worried all the time. I am always scared of the police,” Meetee says, looking into the distance, over the jungle mountains surrounding the government office where she sits.

Meetee is a member of the Akha hill tribe, one of the ethnic minority groups that live in Thailand's Northern region. The Akha people have a distinct language and culture. Originally from China, they settled in the mountainous region between Thailand and Burma long before modern country borders and states were drawn. Meetee lives in an Akha village that was founded almost 100 years ago. It is nestled on a rural mountain inside a national park, surrounded by dense jungles. It is isolated and beautiful.

Meetee wears traditional Akha clothes, a black jacket with colorful cross-stitched trim and a large silver necklace, and carries her precious documentation that proves she is a Thai citizen in an Akha bag stitched with an intricate pattern. She has lived in Thailand for over 70 years. She has worked, married and raised her children in Thailand. The rest of her family has Thai citizenship and ID cards. She is one of only two people in her village still waiting. “I just feel bad. Everyone is Thai, but I am not Thai,” she explains with tears in her eyes.

Over thirty years ago, Meetee applied for Thai citizenship, and her application was approved. She was thrilled; now her life would be so different! She would be able to enjoy freedoms and benefits that had been cut off from her. However, the 79-year-old woman is quick to add that things did not turn out the way she expected.



After more than 30 years of waiting, Meetee received her ID card, her proof of Thai citizenship, in September 2018. IJM staff accompanied her and celebrated the long-awaited victory.

Instead of Meetee receiving her ID card, which serves as proof of her citizenship application approval, her card never came. Even though she went to the district office many times, her name was never on the list of those who would receive their cards. Meanwhile, she continued living as though she did not have citizenship because she had no way to prove that she was Thai.

Vulnerable and Neglected

Meetee was never able to go to school and has never learned to speak, read or write Thai. Unable to communicate with the world outside of her Akha speaking village, including those who worked at the government office, Meetee has been highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.



Above: Meetee's house, on the right, is built from bamboo in the traditional Akha style. Below: The system for filing applications in Thailand is complicated, and the laws change frequently. IJM helps hill tribe people navigate the system and advocates for reforms at the national level.



In Thailand, if you are stateless, your life is very difficult; there is no one to fight for you or to protect your rights. In fact, you are not even eligible for many of the same rights and benefits as Thai people. For example, you cannot own land or a house. You are not guaranteed a fair wage. Your employer can pay you anything they want because you have no way to seek justice or hold them accountable. Traditionally, hill tribe people have not been recognized as Thai by the government. “Without citizenship, I have always felt very neglected,” Meetee explains.

A person without citizenship cannot travel freely. There are checkpoints all over the Thai countryside, and if you are caught traveling through a checkpoint when you are stateless, you can be imprisoned and fined. Meetee looks to her friend and says “When I would go to work, I was scared. I cannot travel anywhere.” Meetee worked for many years as a farmer, earning about 230 THB per day, or \$6.50, but in order to go to work Meetee needed to go through her local checkpoint. She recalls many times being selected at these checkpoints to provide an ID card. If the police did that, they would send her home, she could not work that day and would lose an entire day's wages.

If you are stateless in Thailand, you are also not eligible for the government subsidized universal healthcare available to all Thai people¹. The system is designed to help ensure affordable health care is available for all Thai people, that the high cost of health care would not negatively impact the poorest in the population. The cost

¹ Kingston, Cohen and Morely, “Debate: Limitations on Universality: “Right to Health” and the Necessity of Legal Nationality”, *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 2010, page 8.

to see a doctor is 30 THB, less than \$1. However, for more than 800,000 stateless hill tribe people who are not eligible for this plan, healthcare is largely inaccessible due to the high cost.²

“Healthcare benefits are not equal. We [stateless hill tribe people] have to pay more money if we get sick and need to see a doctor. If I need a shot I have to pay 400 THB (approximately \$11.25),” Meetee explains, looking pained and worried. In her old age, the high cost of healthcare is a concern for her.

She goes on to explain, “If I have to go to a government hospital, the nurse or doctor will not take care of me because they know I am hill tribe. They treat me badly. They talk badly about me and do not want to help me. Many stateless people don’t want to go to a government hospital. They would rather not go or go to a private hospital where we can be treated better, but it is very expensive.” Discrimination against ethnic minority groups is common in Thailand and impacts many aspects of a person’s life.

Without citizenship, Meetee lives in dire poverty. She does not have much money, cannot work, and her children struggle to support her and her husband. If she was able to gain her ID card, she would be eligible for the 800 THB per month old age benefit provided by the Thai government. This extra \$22.50 per month would transform her world and allow her to live comfortably in her own country.

IJM Fills in the Darkness

IJM has been working in Thailand to combat citizenship rights abuse for over 10 years. The organization helps to educate ethnic minority groups and government officials through trainings about the complex application process and nationality laws. The system for filing applications is complicated and the laws change frequently.

There is also significant prejudice against ethnic minorities who have a different language and culture from ethnic Thai people. IJM staff, many of whom come from these tribes themselves and can speak the languages, partner with villagers to help them collect the correct paperwork and file under the correct law that grants nationality to those eligible for it.

Additionally, IJM’s team advocates for individual cases that have been wrongfully delayed or denied. The team also advocates at the national level, seeking to simplify and expand the laws relating to citizenship. They have achieved great success in this area and expanded freedoms for stateless people as well as eligibility criteria for those seeking citizenship.

IJM has helped over 20,000 people gain citizenship or correct legal status. In the first six months of 2018 alone, they have helped over 1,100 people to live lives of freedom and protection in their own country.

As a stateless person, Meetee lived in fear, without freedoms or benefits she was entitled to.



² Royal Thai Government Central Registrar, December 31, 2016.

IJM Partners with Meete

IJM first heard about Meete's case through word of mouth. They have been working in Mae Fah Luang, where she lives, for three years fighting citizenship rights abuse. "Poor people cannot file these applications on their own. They don't understand the system. IJM helps stand between them and the government, advocating on their behalf," explains Meeah, a woman who volunteers with IJM at the district office through a partnership with her church and is also a member of the Akha hill tribe.

IJM has been standing in for Meete, advocating for her for several years. IJM field operatives have checked and organized her documents, brought her to meetings at the district office, spoken on her behalf to village headmen, deputies and sheriffs. Bu, the IJM caseworker in charge of Meete's case, is Akha herself.

On their last visit to the district office, Bu and Meete thought she would finally receive her ID card. That small blue plastic card would open up a new life for Meete and would give her access to the benefits she needs to live a comfortable life. Bu brought her to the office and organized Meete's documents for her, walked her through the process, and took her arm to help her up the stairs.



Meete with her husband, daughter, and witness—who could verify that Meete was born in her village.

When the time came to take Meete's photo for the ID card, Bu and Meete discovered there was one final step, an unexpected roadblock. The system for giving out the 13-digit ID numbers had moved from a paper-based system to an electronic system since Meete received her citizenship approval 30 years ago. The local government officer did not know what to do in her case; never before had he experienced this kind of situation. The local government will have to wait for the central government to give Meete her ID number before she can get the card that transforms her life. Meete and Bu were disappointed, but they did not give up hope.

Years of Waiting Come to an End

In September 2018, IJM's team received the news that Meete had been waiting for decades to hear: her ID card was in the local government office, ready for her to retrieve. IJM accompanied her and celebrated this long-awaited day. With this precious document, she is now able to access healthcare benefits and the old age benefit—meager, yet lifechanging sums for Meete and her family.