

Babies on board

Electronic birth registration is helping pave a brighter future for newborns in the North.

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ENSURING THE 'FIRST RIGHT' ONLINE

An electronic birth registration processes is helping pave a brighter future for newborns in the North

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Among the many things on the "to do" list of 30-year-old Namaoy Satrom, who the day before had given birth to a healthy baby girl at Udon Thani Provincial Hospital, was something she had never realised the importance of before: registering her child's birth.

"The nurse kept reminding me to register my baby at birth," said Namaoy, an Udon Thani farmer. "I didn't under-

stand before that my child could miss out on many important things in life if she doesn't have a birth certificate."

Namaoy was one of thousands of parents in Thailand who are still unaware of the need to officially register the birth of their children with local authorities. Some parents confuse the delivery certificate they receive from the hospital when their children are born with the official birth certificate issued by the

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A mother holds her day-old baby in front of the registration office at Udon Thani Hospital. The Hospital is one of six using a Unicef-supported computer programme that links information on the birth of each hospital-born child to the civil registration system.



civil registrar office. In order to receive a birth certificate, the parents or relatives of a newborn must bring the delivery certificate to the local civil registrar's office so that the birth can be officially recorded.

A reproductive health survey carried out last year by the National Statistical Office found that more than 90 percent of children in Thailand are born at hospitals. However, an estimated 5 percent of children born each year, about 40,000 children, are not registered at birth. These births are not being registered even though the law states that any child born in Thailand, including to non-Thai parents or parents who have no legal status, has the right to be registered and to obtain a birth certificate.

In an effort to register more children and provide them with birth certificates, the Department of Provincial Administration last year developed a computer programme which links information on the birth of each child in a hospital to the civil registration system. The online birth registration programme, which is supported by Unicef Thailand, is now being piloted in six hospitals across the country, including Udon Thani Hospital.

"Information on each child's birth at a hospital is automatically transferred to the civil registration system, so registrar officials know which families have not come to make a record of births and obtain a birth certificates at the registration office," said Amanda Bissex, Unicef Thailand's Chief of Child Protection. "This way, officials are able to identify and track those children who still need to register and to follow up with their families."

Bissex noted that many parents do not realise how important obtaining a birth certificate is for their child's future.

"A birth certificate is the first legal recognition of a child's existence as well as the first step towards proving nationality a child's nationality," said Bissex, adding that without it a child can be denied the right to subsidised health care and other social welfare services, and can face restrictions on travel that limit both education and employment opportunities.

"For example, children without birth certificates are sometimes not allowed to leave the districts where they live, which means that a child who wants to continue her education at a school outside their home district may not be able to," Bissex said.

Due to their lack of legal status and the resulting restrictions, children without birth certificates are also more



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Susina Matiphan, a day old baby, was registered at birth and obtained a birth certificate at Udon Thani Hospital. The hospital provides a 'one-stop' birth registration service where civil registrar staff are stationed inside the hospital to issue birth certificates for newborns.

vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, Bissex said.

"If they are unable to continue going to school or to seek legal employment, they are much more likely to be trafficked into the sex industry or into other harmful and dangerous jobs," Bissex said.

Prayong Uppakot, Head of the Registration Department at Udon Thani Hospital, said that in addition to tracking

the birth registration status of newborns, the online system will also allow children to be registered even years after they are born since the information from the hospitals will be remain in the civil registration system.

"We are determined to have all children born at our hospital registered at birth, and linking our birth records to the civil registration system makes this

much easier to do," said Prayong, adding that Udon Thani Hospital also provides a "one-stop" birth registration service where civil registrar staff are stationed inside the hospital to issue birth certificates for newborns.

The lack of a birth certificate to prove a person's birth place and parents' nationalities is a major cause of statelessness. An estimated 2 million people living in Thailand are stateless — meaning they have no officially recognised nationality — including some 400,000 indigenous and hill tribe people in the northern provinces.

Nasaw Merjoo, 16, is among the many stateless children in Chiang Mai's Mae Ai district. Born at home in Mae Ai to Thai parents, the talkative and lively Lahu-ethnic girl only discovered that she was stateless last year, when the district office refused to issue her an identity card when she turned 15.

According to the Nationality Act, Nasaw is eligible for Thai nationality because she was born to Thai parents. But Nasaw was not registered at birth, and the only birth-related document she has is the delivery certificate issued by the village head 16 years ago.

Last year, Nasaw attended the Unicef-supported stateless classroom project in Mae Ai, where she learned about laws related to nationality and legal status. She now understands that it would have been much easier for her to prove that she is a Thai national today if her birth had been registered and her family had been issued a birth certificate.

"I kept going to the district office with the delivery certificate to apply for an ID card," said Nasaw. "But they kept refusing to give me one and asked me to complete a DNA test to prove that I was born to a Thai mother."

To prove their Thai nationality, authorities often require stateless children to undergo DNA tests. But for many hill tribe families, who earn only about 120 baht a day, the 2,000-to-7,000-baht cost for a DNA test per person means it will be forever out of reach.

"I'm getting worried about not having an ID card," Nasaw said. "I'm afraid that I'll always be forced to stay at home and unable to go anywhere or apply for any jobs."

Nasaw and her family are now struggling to save for her DNA test.

"My friends at school keep asking me if I'm a foreigner," said Nasaw, her eyes welling up with tears. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not really a Thai at all because I don't have an ID card like they do."

Unicef's Bissex urged the expansion of the online registration programme to



other hospitals around the country, as well as the establishment of one-stop birth registration services at as many hospitals as possible. Such efforts, she said, would go a long way towards ensuring that far fewer children end up struggling, like Nasaw, to prove their right to a nationality.

"The right to be registered at birth is often referred to as a child's 'first right' because many of a child's other basic rights can depend on a child being registered," Bissex said. "So we need to do everything within our power to ensure that right is upheld and protected."

RIGHT
Nasaw Merjoo, 16, is among many stateless children in Chiang Mai's Mae Ai district. Although Nasaw is eligible for Thai nationality, she does not have a birth certificate to prove she was born to a Thai mother as she was not registered at birth.