

Slavery and trafficking in Thai fishing industry

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Slavery remains endemic throughout Thailand's seafood industry, according to a Greenpeace report published on December 15. *Turn the Tide*, the 86-page report into illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, describes vessels travelling thousands of miles into remote waters to avoid legal regulations and surveillance. Thailand's fishing industry is the fourth largest in the world, with a 42,000-strong fleet, and is a central part of the country's GDP.

The 12-month investigation followed a 2015 Associated Press (AP) exposure of appalling abuses in the Thai industry. AP reported trawlers operating off the coasts of South East Asia with thousands of slaves, smuggled from Burma (Myanmar) or Thailand, brutalised and forced to work against their will. When not at sea, crews were kept in cages at ports on remote islands in Indonesia. Workers in onshore factories, including small children, were found doing 16-hour days peeling shrimp in ice buckets. According to the UN, 60 percent of Burmese migrants in Thailand's seafood industry were victims of forced labour.

The new Greenpeace report provides detailed evidence that widespread structural abuses persist despite the Thai government's insistence that new legal measures to police the sector are working. The EU warned Thailand last year to clean up its \$US6.5 billion industry or face a ban on its exports. In response, the military regime implemented limited measures against trafficking and arrested more than 100 people, mostly low-level operators.

Trafficking, murder and corruption still pervade the industry. Investigations by the Environmental Justice Foundation have found that the policing of fishing boats was highly erratic, overfishing rampant, the use of cheap and forced labour undiminished, and that crew transfers occurred at sea to hide trafficking from

authorities.

Greenpeace observed several official inspections and alleged that the Royal Thai Navy failed to adequately identify and protect victims. Crew members reported that they had not been paid for some years, did not possess correct work permits, and had paid extortionate recruitment fees. Yet authorities cleared the vessels to return to port. The tiny number of convictions linked to trafficking decreased from 206 in 2014 to 169 in 2015.

Greenpeace claims that much of the seafood caught by Thai vessels is unreported, unregulated and essentially illegal. Depleted seafood stocks in the Gulf of Thailand forced ships to move to waters off Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, frequently using fake permits and ghost fleets to avoid inspections. An Indonesian government policy to sink vessels caught fishing illegally in the country's waters forced boats into less policed waters off Papua New Guinea, Greenpeace claims.

Greenpeace tracked Thailand's overseas fishing vessels and found that, after restrictions were imposed by the governments of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea in August 2015, as many as 76 Thai-flagged vessels shifted operations to the Saya de Malha bank off the eastern coast of mainland Africa, more than 7,000 kilometres from their home ports. There, vessels are out of reach of authorities, operating outside the law.

Large refrigerated vessels known as "reefers" remain at sea for years at a time, trans-shipping their catches. Captains routinely abuse, beat and traffic fishermen. Survivors told Greenpeace that daily beatings were part of everyday life, and that many had given up hope of ever getting off the boats alive. Of 15 trafficked survivors interviewed, almost half experienced physical violence. One of the main reasons for beatings was

illness, especially when there was insufficient food and exhausted crew members would try to rest.

According to a 2016 Thai government report, nearly half of the 1,000 fishermen on 50 vessels in the Saya de Malha bank were working in violation of immigration and labour laws. Greenpeace interviewed men who had been trafficked to the boats after being told they would be employed at an on-shore fish processing factory. Instead, they worked 20-hour days, seven days a week, and could only leave the vessels once they had paid back the 30,000 baht (\$US834) for which the captains had bought them.

Some fishermen are at sea for as long as five years. Beriberi, a preventable disease caused by vitamin B1 deficiency and common in the nineteenth century, was responsible for the hospitalisation and death earlier this year of a number of Cambodian and Thai fishermen who had continuously manned a reefer for nine months.

The report concludes by calling for greater controls and enforcement. Its recommendations include “prioritising efforts to eliminate risky practices,” “improved” inspections and better “transparency” to “hold sub-standard operators to account.” It absurdly declares that ultimate responsibility “rests with the industry.” In reality, the conditions described in the report are the inevitable outcome of the existing political set-up and the capitalist profit system.

Turn the Tide reveals that the powerful companies which are implicated in the use of slavery and other illegal practices are intimately connected through ownership and family ties to “significant interests” throughout the seafood supply chain as well as to influential positions in Thai “industry and politics.”

The Thai military junta is a repressive, anti-working class regime tacitly supported by Washington. The ruling National Council for Peace and Order, which came to power in a military coup in May 2014 by removing the elected Pheu Thai Party government, has maintained conditions of martial law. Torture is regularly used by the police and military, public gatherings and protests are banned, the media has been censored and elections have repeatedly been postponed.

More fundamentally, the fishing industry is an example of the global nature of capitalist production. It operates across national borders in defiance of nationally-based regulations to deliver ever-greater profits by producing at the cheapest price.

Thai seafood exporters include global operators such as Kingfisher Holdings, owned by the world’s largest seafood conglomerate, Japan-based Mahura Nichiro Corporation. Kingfisher, one of the companies implicated in AP’s 2015 slavery investigation, produces squid, shrimp and mackerel products for export to restaurant chains, food service companies, wholesalers and retailers throughout the US, Europe and Australia.

Under conditions of the worsening global economic crisis, the brutal practices uncovered by Greenpeace are not the exception, but increasingly the norm.

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