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Thailand failing to tackle fishing industry slavery, says rights group

Environmental Justice Foundation says progress on eliminating human trafficking in Thai fishing 'wholly inadequate'



The Thai government claims to have made progress in cracking down on slavery in its fishing industry, but a report by the Environmental Justice Foundation contains a litany of failures. Photograph: Nicolas Asfour/AFP/Getty Images

Thailand has made wholly inadequate progress in its efforts to eliminate human trafficking in its multi-billion dollar fishing industry, and has failed to combat both endemic corruption and the involvement of state officials in trafficking despite repeated promises to do so, a rights group claims.

Trafficking victims are still vulnerable to abuse and attack in Thai government shelters, while government inspections of fishing vessels consistently fail to identify abuse or perpetrators of abuse, the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) says in a briefing paper, [Broken Promises](#) (pdf). These failures, among a litany of others, prove that the government's efforts over the past year have failed to meet even the most minimum of standards for eradicating slavery, the group says.

Thailand was downgraded in June to the lowest level in the US State Department's [Trafficking in Persons report](#), ranking it alongside Iran, North Korea and Saudi Arabia in its treatment of workers and the way it protects them from abuse. The downgrade came after a [Guardian report into the Thai fishing industry](#) found that slaves forced to work on Thai fishing boats for no pay were integral to processing prawns sold in the US, UK and elsewhere in the EU by industry giants including [Tesco](#), [Walmart](#), [Carrefour](#) and [Costco](#).

But the military-backed government claims to have made significant progress in its attempts to combat human trafficking over the past year. Last month, deputy foreign minister Don Pramudwinai detailed extensive new measures – GPS-monitoring systems on fleets, million-dollar fines for illegal fishing and anti-corruption officers to improve investigations – as proof that the [nation was cracking down on slavery](#).

The EJF paper, however, highlights alarming reports of slavery over the past year, among them the October rescue by Indonesian authorities of 35 Thai nationals from Thai fishing fleets, and the January sale of a father and son on to a Thai trawler by Thai police officers.

The lack of regulation or prosecution of illegal labour brokers, enforcement of existing laws, or even provision of adequate protection and support to trafficking victims – many of whom have alleged assault, threats at gunpoint and physical beatings at government shelters – are clear indicators that Thailand should remain on the State Department's lowest ranking this year, said EJF's executive director, Steve Trent.

"Nothing that we have seen or heard in the last year indicates that Thailand has taken meaningful action to address the root causes of trafficking and abuse," said Trent. "After four years on the [tier 2 watchlist and one year on tier 3](#), the Royal Thai government is still failing to take the action needed to prevent trafficking and human rights abuses in the fishing industry."

Although Thailand began inspections at sea last year, video footage shows interviews of fishermen taking place in front of their boat captains or gangmasters – the very men who are often responsible for trafficking workers – while local media reports indicate that officials often fail to determine the work conditions, wages or trafficking status of those being questioned. This is due in part to inadequate screening processes, EJF claims, but also to the lack of official vessels at sea, budget restrictions on fuel, and maritime border issues.

Other rights groups, among them Human Rights Watch, have said that nothing less than a complete overhaul of Thailand's fishing industry would suffice to address the "systematic and pervasive use of trafficked men" on its fishing boats.

"Only a few of the most open and forward-looking companies and industry associations are moving to address the challenges of labour exploitation quickly enough, and they too are held back by the government bureaucracy, corruption and entrenched broker-reliant migrant recruitment, registration and regularisation systems," migrant rights

activist Andy Hall said.

“Too many companies, as well as purchasing giants overseas, continue to seek to hide these challenges through ineffective audits whilst passing almost all of the burdens and costs of these challenges on to workers or subcontractors.”

Thailand has pointed to its registration of 1.6 million migrant workers – 70,000 of whom EJF claims work directly in the fishing industry – as proof that it is combating trafficking. But with the Thai fishing industry facing a labour shortage of roughly 50,000 men, recruitment on to fishing boats remains, by and large, an informal process taken on by illegal brokers who work directly with Thai boat captains.

Little has been done to address that shortage, rights groups claim, and a recent [government proposal to fill that gap with prison inmates](#) was met with both local and international derision.

Activists working in trafficking hotspots in Thailand recently told the Guardian that while the government had ramped up patrols in ports and on docked fishing vessels, the real problem was still the thousands of trafficked men stuck out at sea.

“From what I can see, trafficking is still in full force,” one activist charged with helping vulnerable seafarers in southern Thailand told the Guardian. “A Burmese slave recently escaped from a [fishing] boat and said there were many others like him still out at sea – Burmese, Cambodian, all sorts – so to me it looks like the measures aren’t working.”

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