

Thailand arrests suspected leader of human trafficking gang

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(Reuters) - Thai authorities have captured the suspected leader of a human trafficking gang, who confessed to selling some migrants from Myanmar into slavery on Thai fishing boats and possibly murdering as many as seven, a Thai official said on Friday.

Ko Myo, a 42-year-old Myanmar national, was shot and captured at a rubber plantation in southern Surat Thani during a raid by the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) and local police.

The raid follows mounting international concern over the trafficking of Myanmar migrants in Thailand's lucrative fishing industry, one of several sources of human slavery in the country that could trigger U.S. sanctions.

It also follows a Reuters investigation published on July 17 that found human smugglers selling some Rohingya Muslims into slavery on Thai fishing boats.

Thousands of Rohingya have fled Myanmar in recent months after violence with Buddhists, who follow the country's majority religion.

Ko Myo will face human trafficking charges first, said Komvich Padhanarath, a senior official in the human trafficking division of the DSI, which is part of the Justice Ministry. "The murder charge is under further investigation, and it will be a time-consuming process to verify the bodies."

Ko Myo was named in a report by the Environmental Justice Foundation, a London-based non-government body funded by environmental advocacy groups, which called him a trafficker and implicated him in murder and rape.

Komvich said Ko Myo had confessed to trafficking and murder but not rape. Reuters was unable to immediately reach Ko Myo or his representatives for comment.

The DSI would contact Myanmar authorities to identify other gang members and help apprehend brokers there, Komvich added.

The Reuters investigation found that Rohingya who could not pay for their passage were handed by brokers to traffickers, who sometimes sold the men as indentured servants on farms or into slavery on Thai fishing boats.

It also found that Thai naval security forces had been involved in the people smuggling. The navy denied the charge, but the U.S. State Department said the Thai government should look into the allegations.

For the past four years, an annual State Department report monitoring global efforts to combat modern-day slavery has kept Thailand on its "Tier-2 Watch List", a notch above the worst offenders, such as North Korea. A drop to Tier 3 can trigger sanctions, including the blocking of World Bank aid.

Reuters reporters visited a detention center in Phang Nga in southern Thailand in July, where 269 Rohingya men and boys lived in cage-like cells that stank of sweat and urine. Most had been held for six months by then.

Around 261 Rohingya tried on Thursday to escape from the center at Phang Nga but failed, although 30 managed on Friday to break out of a police station in Songkhla, also in the south, police said.