

Trafficked into slavery on Thai trawlers to catch food for prawns

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The Thai fishing industry is built on slavery, with men often beaten, tortured and sometimes killed - all to catch 'trash fish' to feed the cheap farmed prawns sold in the west

- Revealed: Asian slave labour producing prawns for supermarkets in US, UK
- Thailand's seafood industry: a case of state-sanctioned slavery?



Burmese migrant workers leave the port

There is nothing but a jagged line of splinters where Myint Thein's teeth once stood – a painful reminder, he says, of the day he was beaten and sold on to a Thai fishing boat.

The tattooed Burmese fisherman, 29, bears a number of other “reminders” of his life at sea: two deep cuts on each arm, calloused fingers contorted like claws and facial muscles that twitch involuntarily from fear. For the past two years, Myint Thein has been forced to work 20-hour days as a

slave on the high seas, enduring regular beatings from his Thai captain and eating little more than a plate of rice each day. But now that he's been granted a rare chance to come back to port, he's planning something special to mark the occasion: his escape.

Using a pair of rusty scissors, Myint Thein chops off his long, scraggly locks. He rinses himself down with a hose, slips on his only pair of trousers and, peering out at his surroundings, remembers not to open his mouth too wide. A man with no teeth is easy to remember.

Under the tinny roof of Songkhla's commercial port, on Thailand's south-east coast, the imperial-blue cargo boat that brought Myint Thein back to shore is unloading its catch, barrel by barrel. The day's international fish trading has just begun, and buyers are milling about in bright yellow rubber boots, running slimy scales between their fingers, as hobbling cats nibble at the fishbones and guts strewn across the pavement.

Myint Thein doesn't have much time to talk, so he tells us the basics. He paid a middleman two years ago to smuggle him across the border into Thailand and find him a job in a factory. After an arduous journey travelling through dense jungle, over bumpy roads and across rough waves, Myint Thein finally arrived in Kantang, a Thai port on its western, Andaman coast, where he discovered he'd been sold to a boat captain. “When I realised what had happened, I told them I

wanted to go back,” he says hurriedly. “But they wouldn’t let me go. When I tried to escape, they beat me and smashed all my teeth.”

For the next 20 months, Myint Thein and three other Burmese men who were also sold to the boat trawled international waters, catching anything from squid and tuna to “trash fish”, also known as bycatch – inedible or infant species of fish later ground into fishmeal for Thailand’s multibillion-dollar farmed prawn industry. The supply chain runs from the slaves through the fishmeal to the prawns to UK and US retailers. The product of Myint Thein’s penniless labour might well have ended up on your dinner plate.



Thai 'trash fish' workers unload the catch at Songkhla port.

Thai 'trash fish' workers unload the catch at Songkhla port. Chris Kelly/Guardian

Despite public promises to clean up the industry, many Thai officials not only turn a blind eye to abuse, the Guardian found, they are often complicit in it, from local police through to high-ranking politicians and members of the judiciary – meaning that slaves often have nowhere to turn when they have the opportunity to run.

“One day I was stopped by the police and asked if I had a work permit,” says Ei Ei Lwin, 29, a Burmese migrant who was detained on the docks at Songkhla port. “They wanted a 10,000 baht (£180) bribe to release me. I didn’t have it, and I didn’t know anyone else who would, so they took me to a secluded area, handed me over to a broker, and sent me to work on a trawler.”

Brokers

Thailand produces roughly 4.2m tonnes of seafood every year, 90% of which is destined for export, official figures show. The US, UK and EU are prime buyers of this seafood – with Americans buying half of all Thailand’s seafood exports and the UK alone consuming nearly 7% of all Thailand’s prawn exports.

“The use of trafficked labour is systematic in the Thai fishing industry,” says Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia division, who describes a “predatory relationship” between these migrant workers and the captains who buy them.

“The industry would have a hard time operating in its current form without it.”

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a high-ranking broker explained to the Guardian how Thai

boat owners phone him directly with their “order”: the quantity of men they need and the amount they’re willing to pay for them.

“Each guy costs about 25,000-35,000 baht [£450-£640] – we go find them,” explains the goateed broker, who operates out of the industrial fishing and prawn-processing hub of Samut Sakhon, just south of the capital, Bangkok.

“The boat owner finds the way to pay and then that debt goes to the labourers.”

At various points along the way, checkpoints are passed and officials bribed – with Thai border police often playing an integral role.

“Police and brokers – the way I see it – we’re business partners,” explains the broker, who claims to have trafficked thousands of migrants into Thailand over the past five years. “We have officers working on both sides of the Thai-Burmese border. If I can afford the bribe, I let the cop sit in the car and we take the main road.

“This is a big chain,” he adds. “You have to understand: everyone’s profiting from it. These are powerful people with powerful positions – politicians.”

The price captains pay for these men is a extremely low even by historical standards. According to the anti-trafficking activist Kevin Bales, slaves cost 95% less than they did at the height of the 19th-century slave trade – meaning that they are not regarded as investments for important cash crops such as cotton or sugar, as they were historically, but as disposable commodities.

For the migrants who believed Thailand would bring them opportunity, the reality of being sent out to sea is devastating.

“They told me I was going to work in a pineapple factory,” recalls Kyaw, a broad-shouldered 21-year-old from rural Burma. “But when I saw the boats, I realised I’d been sold ... I was so depressed, I wanted to die.”

Chained

Life on a 15-metre trawler is brutal, violent and unpredictable. Many of the slaves interviewed by the Guardian recalled being fed just a plate of rice a day. Men would take fitful naps in sleeping quarters so cramped they would crawl to enter them, before being summoned back out to trawl fish at any hour. Those who were too ill to work were thrown overboard, some interviewees reported, while others said they were beaten if they so much as took a lavatory break.

Many of these slave ships stay out at sea for years at a time, trading slaves from one boat to another and being serviced by cargo boats, which travel out from Thai ports towards international borders to pick up the slave boats’ catch and drop off supplies.

The vessels catch fish and shellfish for domestic and international markets, including roughly

350,000 tonnes of trash fish, every year, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This trash fish is separated at sea and ferried back on cargo boats to shore, where it is ground down and turned into fishmeal for multinational companies such as CP Foods, which use it in animal feed for prawn, pig and chicken farming.

CP in turn supplies food retailers and giant international supermarkets including Walmart, Tesco, Carrefour, Costco, Morrisons, the Co-operative and Iceland, with frozen and fresh prawns, and ready-made meals.

"Just about every retailer in the United Kingdom buys material from CP," explains CP Foods' UK managing director, Bob Miller. "We're not here to defend what is going on. We know there's issues with regard to the [raw] material that comes in [to port], but to what extent that is, we just don't have visibility," says Miller.

Extensive overfishing in the Gulf of Thailand has forced Thai fleets to travel further afield for longer periods to meet market demands. According to UN estimates, roughly 40% of all Thailand's seafood is now being caught in foreign waters, from Malaysia and Indonesia all the way out towards Papua New Guinea to the east and Bangladesh to the west.

Coupled with mounting petrol prices, this overfishing has led to ever-decreasing profit margins for Thai boat captains, says Human Rights Watch's Robertson: "What motivates is not concern for fishermen's welfare, but rather maximising catch and ensuring profitability, and that means 18- to 22-hour work days and martial discipline to keep men working."

Of the 15 current and former slaves the Guardian interviewed during the investigation, 10 had witnessed a fellow fisherman murdered by his boat captain or net master.

Ei Ei Lwin, the Burmese fisherman, claims he saw "18 to 20 people killed in front of me".

"Some were shot, others were tied up with stones and thrown into the sea, and one was ripped apart," he says. "He hated his captain and tried to beat him to death. But the captain escaped by jumping into the sea. The other captains came and pinned [the fisherman] down. Then they tied up his hands and legs to four separate boats and pulled him apart."

With nearly 50,000 registered fishing vessels, Thailand has one of the world's largest fishing fleets. But the Thai government admits this figure is merely an estimate of the number of Thai boats plying the seas. "Ghost boats" – unlicensed replicas of properly registered and licensed boats – make up as much as half of Thailand's true fishing fleet, according to a 2011 International Organisation for Migration report.

Boat managers, captains and fishermen – as well as the Royal Thai Marine police – described to the Guardian how "ghost licences" allow boats unfettered access into Malaysian, Burmese or Indonesian waters, where other ghost boats then keep watch for patrolling authorities.

“There’s a technique,” a high-ranking marine police officer in Kantang, on the Andaman coast, told the Guardian. “If you have 10 boats, you buy a licence for just two or three boats. Then you’ll have two boats with the same name, and two with no name.” He chuckles. “If they get stopped, they have a licence to show the authorities, but really it’s a fake licence.”

Not every deep-sea trawler is a ghost boat or manned by slaves. But on two separate occasions at Songkhla port, the Guardian was present when two slaves were brought back to shore on cargo boats ferrying trash fish that they, and the other slaves on their boats, had trawled. On both occasions, the Guardian followed the trash fish as it was loaded on to trucks at port and delivered to two separate fishmeal factories that supply CP Foods – a direct link proving that the multinational was buying fishmeal from factories that have slavery in their supply chain.

The industry

CP said in a statement that it believed the right thing was to use its commercial weight to try to influence the Thai government to act rather than walk away from the Thai fishing industry, although it is putting in place plans to use alternative proteins in its feed so that it can eliminate Thai fishmeal by 2021 if necessary. While it recognises that workers on boats are exploited, it added that the Thai department of fisheries continues to deny that unregistered boats are a problem. “We can do nothing, and witness these social and environmental issues destroy the seas around Thailand, or we can help drive improvement plans. We are making good progress,” it said.

CP said it requires and pays its 38 fishmeal factories to ensure that they only buy trash fish from legal and licensed boats. In theory, this requires boat captains to log the location, date, time, and quantity of their catch and to register their workers.

But the Guardian discovered that in practice captains often fail to record trash fish data. Many of them also know there are slaves on the fishing trawlers but never report it to authorities.

“I don’t care if the men are trafficked or not, I just buy the fish,” one boat captain told the Guardian. “I need to make money.”

And even fishmeal factory owners directly supplying CP doubt the veracity of these fishing logs. “I don’t think it’s 100% true,” said one factory owner in Songkhla. “That’s why I want to take my own boat out to spy on them [the trawlers].”

The Thai government also admits that a new scheme to register boats as legal and licensed is plagued by corruption and a lack of political willpower. Songkhla’s marine police told the Guardian that some fishing boat owners simply don’t comply when requested to register their foreign workers. An official tasked with the job confirmed this. “The biggest problem we face is the politicians in this area,” said the Thai fisheries department employee who was in the process of registering boats at port. “They own the fishing boats and some of them don’t want to be regulated. They have their own laws, their own regulations, that’s how they see it. They’re more

powerful than we are, so it means we can't really enforce the law."

Thai law also prevents the authorities from curbing trafficking – for example, the Thai Royal Marine police are not allowed to patrol more than 12 miles from shore. "There are [slave] labourers out there in Indonesian and Malaysian waters who are being abused," one high-ranking policeman told the Guardian. "But I can't go there. I don't have the authority. All I can do is pressure the boat owners. If I go [into international waters] I will get shot at by the [relevant] authorities."



hidden cam prawn trawler slaves

Hidden camera footage of Thai trawler slaves.

The Guardian

Simon Funge-Smith, senior fishery officer at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation's Asia-Pacific regional office, says the Thai government has failed to adopt legislation to keep up with fishing industry practices. "Fishing has evolved from happening a few miles from shore to thousands of miles away, from being entirely crewed by

nationals to a high dependence on migrant labour," he says. "Relevant departments have been complacent or simply constrained by limited capacity to bring procedures up to speed, so even simple procedures like inspecting a vessel to check crewlists, passports or catches, may not take place on board."

CP Foods says that it will cut fishmeal out of its prawnfeed by 2021, but until then it hopes to address trafficking by working with the Thai government to register these problem trawlers.

"We'd like to solve the problem of Thailand because there's no doubt commercial interests have created much of this problem, and it will be to the commercial aspects of the industry that the solutions will have to come," says Bob Miller.

The Guardian's findings come at a crucial time for Thailand. After being warned for four consecutive years that it was not doing enough to tackle slavery within its borders, Thailand now risks being downgraded to the lowest ranking on the US state department's human trafficking index, which evaluates 188 nations according to how well they combat and prevent human trafficking. A relegation to Tier 3 would put Thailand on a par with North Korea and Iran, and could lead to a downgrade in Thailand's trading status with the US.

The Thai government told the Guardian that it was "committed to capturing, prosecuting and convicting unscrupulous actors in the fishing industry to hold them accountable for their crimes".

But when we presented the Royal Thai navy with the exact coordinates and details of slave ships no immediate action was taken.

The Thai government insists that it has formed task forces, increased trafficking prosecutions and coordinated inter-agency efforts to tackle slavery within its borders.

“Thailand is committed to combating human trafficking, making it a top national priority,” said Vijavat Isarabhakdi, the Thai ambassador to the US. “We know a lot more need to be done, but we also have made very significant progress to address the problem.”

“To maintain momentum on convictions, we need more than stories of atrocities. Thai enforcement action can happen when receiving all necessary information and cooperation from all stakeholders and in particular when we have names of vessels and those who have committed crimes.”



A young Cambodian migrant worker loads barrels at Songkhla

A young Cambodian migrant worker loads barrels onto his boat at Songkhla port, Thailand. Photograph: Chris Kelly for the Guardian

But in the long years it has been working on this, very little change has actually taken place, says Mark Lagon, a former US ambassador to combat human trafficking.

“The government knows in Thailand that there’s a problem but they’re not taking action. There is no connectivity

between labour inspectors and law enforcement to hold traffickers to account. And, actually, the government is all too often complicit with corruption.”

Some Thai officials say the best way to break the cycle of human trafficking is for the Thai government to issue more permits to make it easier for migrants to work legitimately.

“Raids and rescues don’t work,” said a government official from the department of special investigations, Thailand’s FBI. “Let’s say you rescue five trafficking victims. That means the [captain] now has to find another five workers, so the cycle continues.”

“The Thai government could get rid of the brokers and arrange [legal] employment,” he added. “As long as business owners still depend on brokers – and not the government – to supply workers, then the problem will never go away.”

The anti-slavery campaigner Steve Trent of the Environmental Justice Foundation says slavery

on Thai fishing boats is an open secret acknowledged by Thailand and the many governments and businesses that trade with it.

“The supermarkets know this is happening,” he says. “Everyone knows this is happening. From the boat to the shelf, the supermarkets have an opportunity to stop this ... They are actively supporting slavery by not acting and, conversely, they could be actively working to get rid of it if they really had the desire.”

Lisa Rende Taylor, of Anti-Slavery International, said it was up to international retailers and globalised brands to demand change.

“If local businesses realise that noncompliance results in loss of business and competitiveness, and that these brands and retailers will indeed reconsider their sourcing practices throughout their supply chain, it has the potential to bring about huge positive change in the lives of migrant workers and trafficking victims,” she said.

For the thousands of migrant workers currently in Thailand, that “positive change” is as simple as a legal work permit and monthly paycheck in a regulated industry. Until that happens, however, migrants must fend for themselves – which explains why, when we phoned Myint Thein three days after he escaped in Songkhla, we discovered that he’d taken his chances – and gone to out to sea on another fishing boat.



Cambodian migrant workers on their boat in Songkhla port, Thailand.

Cambodian migrant workers on their boat in Songkhla port, Thailand. Chris Kelly/Guardian

The supermarkets respond

The Thai food giant CP Foods says it sells prawns to many of the leading supermarkets in the US, the UK and across Europe.

The Guardian identified several of its customers and traced CP prawns to all of the top four global retailers –

Walmart, Carrefour, Costco and Tesco – and to other supermarkets including Morrisons, the Co-operative, Aldi, and Iceland.

We asked those named in our investigation to comment on our finding of slavery in their supply chains.

All said they condemned slavery and human trafficking for labour. All also said they conducted rigorous social audits. Some appeared already aware that slavery had been reported in the Thai

fishing sector, and said they were setting up programmes to try to tackle it.

Walmart, the world's largest retailer, told us: "We are actively engaged in this issue and playing an important role in bringing together stakeholders to help eradicate human trafficking from Thailand's seafood export sector."

Carrefour said it conducts social audits of all suppliers, including the CP factory that supplies it with some prawns. It tightened up the process after alerts in 2012. It admitted that it did not check right to the end of its complex chains.

Costco told us it required its suppliers of Thai shrimp "to take corrective action to police their feedstock sources".

Tesco told us: "We regard slavery as completely unacceptable. We are working with CP Foods to ensure the supply chain is slavery-free, and are also working in partnership with the International Labour Organisation and Ethical Trading Initiative to achieve broader change across the Thai fishing industry."

Morrisons said it would take the matter up with CP Foods urgently. "We are concerned by the findings of the investigation. Our ethical trading policy forbids the use of forced labour by suppliers and their suppliers."

The Co-operative was among those claiming it was already working to understand "working conditions beyond the processing level". "The serious issue of human trafficking on fishing boats is challenging to address and requires a partnership" in which it is actively engaged, it said.

Aldi UK said its contractual terms stipulate that suppliers do not engage in any form of forced labour and related practices. "Aldi will not tolerate workplace practices and conditions which violate basic human rights."

Iceland said it only sourced one line containing prawns from a CP Foods subsidiary but was pleased to note that CP was "at the forefront of efforts to raise standards in the Thai fishing industry".

The supermarket sector has been aware of conditions on some Thai fishing vessels for a while, thanks to reports from the UN and non-governmental organisations. A 2009 survey by the UN inter-agency project on human trafficking (UNIAP) found that 59% of migrants it interviewed who had been trafficked on to Thai fishing boats said they had witnessed the murder of a fellow worker.

The Environmental Justice Foundation also reported on slavery and forced labour imposed by violence on Thai trawlers, as well as alleged police collusion.

Retailers have focused until recently, however, on abuses that frequently came to light further up the Thai prawn supply chain – in processing and packing factories or in companies subcontracted

to peel prawns.

It seems that the parlous state of fish stocks and the pressure to monitor supply chains for sustainability has made the issue of slavery visible. Two retailers who did not wish to be named said that when they started to look at where fish for prawn feed was coming from, it became clear that the boats engaged in illegal fishing were also likely to be using trafficked forced labour.

Retailers have joined a new initiative called Project Issara (Project Freedom) to discuss how they should respond and several attended a meeting with the major producers in Bangkok last month at which slavery was discussed.