

[Asia Pacific](#)

Thailand to Open Inquiry Into Human Trafficking Network

By [THOMAS FULLER](#) MAY 4, 2015



A mass grave at a suspected human trafficking camp hidden in a jungle in Thailand's south along the border with Malaysia. Credit Damir Sagolj/Reuters

BANGKOK — The Thai authorities said Monday that they were investigating the complicity of local officials and police officers in a human trafficking network along the border with [Malaysia](#) where [a mass grave has been unearthed](#).

The head of the national police, Gen. Somyot Poompanmoung, said that three local officials and one man from Myanmar had been arrested and that investigations would be opened into the border guard force, which has a base near the site of the mass grave discovered on Friday. As of Monday, 26 bodies had been exhumed.

“If there is anyone involved with this case, we will arrest them all — no exception,” General Somyot said. “This problem has seriously damaged the country.” A Thai state-owned radio station reported Monday that 13 police officers had been transferred and were under investigation for their involvement in a human trafficking ring, saying it was related to the continuing case.

[Thailand](#) is under pressure from the United States and the European Union to stop what has for several years been a thriving business of human smuggling, trafficking and slavery both on land and in its fishing fleets. Bangladeshis and members of the Rohingya ethnic group, a Muslim minority in Myanmar that for the most part is denied citizenship, have taken to the sea in great numbers in recent years seeking jobs in Muslim-majority [Malaysia](#).

Chris Lewa, coordinator of the [Arakan Project](#), a human rights group that tracks migration and human trafficking in the Andaman Sea, calculates that 57,000 people have embarked on the often-perilous boat journeys since October.

The migrants, many of whom are lured by trafficking groups, are held for ransom, abused and in some cases killed by their handlers, the Thai police and human rights groups say.

The United States government last year downgraded [Thailand](#) and Malaysia to the lowest rank in its annual assessment of how countries handle human trafficking.

The Thai junta that came to power in a [coup last May](#) has said it is determined to crack down on human trafficking and raided a number of jungle encampments along the border with Malaysia.

“We want to show that we are seriously tackling this issue,” Gen. Udomdej Sitabutr, the head of Thailand’s army, told the Thai media on Monday. “This has been an issue for years,” he said. “It’s time to fix it.”

The discovery of the mass grave in the hills of the Sadao district a few hundred yards from the Malaysian border was [described as a “turning point”](#) by The Bangkok Post on Monday.

“This government must bring justice to the dead of Sadao or face unmitigated shame at home and abroad,” the newspaper said in an editorial.

The camp was made up of bamboo cages, watchtowers and what the Thai police described as a “torture room,” without giving more details. One survivor of the camp who was found by Thai officials and quoted in the Thai news media said several hundred would-be migrants were in the camp but had fled with their handlers before the police raid.

“Right now it is clear that the detention camp and dead bodies we discovered are related to human trafficking,” Mr. Somyot said. “It is also clear that this is a transnational operation.”

Ms. Lewa of the Arakan Project said the crackdown did not address the reason for the exodus from Myanmar. The Rohingya are restricted from travel within Myanmar and have been persecuted by the country’s Buddhist majority. Tens of thousands now live in camps after their villages were burned by Buddhist mobs over the past three years.

“The Rohingya turn to smugglers because they have no other options,” Ms. Lewa said. “Offshore camps on boats have now replaced those jungle camps. The result of all this is more people dying at sea.”

Poypiti Amatatham contributed reporting.