

# Thailand Toughens Human Trafficking Penalties



FILE - Migrant fishermen from Myanmar work on a boat after returning from the ocean to Ban Nam Khem, Thailand, Dec. 14, 2014.

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BANGKOK—

Thailand's National Assembly has passed amendments to anti-trafficking laws with harsh penalties. The legislation comes as American media reports put spotlight on slave-like conditions on Thai fishing vessels triggering calls for Thailand to crack down on labor exploitation, especially in the seafood industry.

Thailand's tough new measures to combat human trafficking were passed overwhelmingly Thursday by the military-backed National Legislative Assembly, allowing prosecutors to seek life prison terms for those convicted of human trafficking.

The amendments to the anti-trafficking laws will open the way for more robust factory and industry inspections, especially in the fishing and seafood industry, which could lead to suspension of operating licences.

Thailand is under intense international pressure, especially from the United States, to curb human trafficking and abusive labor practices for migrant workers.

Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai says the government is serious about a crackdown on the multi-million dollar human trafficking and smuggling networks.

“We are very, very confident that from December until now we have done a very good job, a good enough job. Not just structural change but also the new Act, the legislation with the new

measures could take care of the concerns of all parties,” he said.

Thailand’s migrant worker population numbers around three million, especially in construction, agriculture and manufacturing, many of whom are undocumented workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The international spotlight has been thrust back on Thailand this week with publication of a detailed report by the U.S.-based news agency, The Associated Press.

In the report, the AP says hundreds of men are working in slave like conditions in the fishing industry and trapped on a remote Indonesian island. The news agency later tracked seafood caught by the men to Thai exporters and fish processing plants.

Following the report, Thailand’s largest seafood company, Thai Union Frozen Products, with annual sales of US\$3.5 billion, announced it had severed ties with a supplier named in the AP story.

But rights groups say there are some doubts whether the new measures will succeed in addressing the problems.

Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network coordinator Anoop Sukumaran says human trafficking legislation is more likely to affect those being smuggled.

“Very often the securitization of combating people smuggling and combating trafficking ends up becoming a sort of victimizing the victims, so to speak, more than actually being able to address the reasons or the kingpins of people smuggling and the traffickers themselves, who often go scot-free,” he said.

The U.S. State Department and U.S. industry groups such as the National Retail Federation, Retail Industry Leaders Association and National Fisheries Institute criticized Thailand over its labor practices.

In 2014, the United States dropped Thailand’s rating in its Trafficking in Person’s (TIP) report to the lowest rating of Tier 3, after the country was seen as failing to show signs of progress in its record on human trafficking and illegal labor. At this level, Thailand faces the threat of a range of sanctions.

Other groups, such as the Thailand-based Migrant Working Group, say the problem is beyond an individual country and see the need for greater regional cooperation. Group Spokesperson Roisai Wongsuban:

“We still cannot use just only a single country approach to deal with issues, problems of the [Muslim] Rohingya [in Myanmar] smuggling movement, the problem of the fisheries in Indonesia - there is no regional collaboration to address the issue,” said the group spokesperson Roisai Wongsuban.

The Association of South East Asian Nations has taken up the issue of human smuggling and

trafficking, but international observers say greater political will is needed for a broad based regional solution to address the problem.