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The U.S. Pushes Thailand to Clean Up Tuna Inc.

A State Department report criticizes workers' exploitation

by [Bruce Einhorn](#)

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Workers process skipjack tuna at a Thai Union Frozen Products packaging plant in Samut Sakhon, Thailand, in 2011.

Photographer: Peter Charlesworth/LightRocket via Getty Images

The migrant workers at Chotiwat Manufacturing's tuna cannery in southern Thailand are not familiar with voting. Most are from Myanmar, which is emerging from military rule. And in Thailand generals staged a coup in 2014. So before Chotiwat held elections for a worker council last year, it ran workshops for 5,500 employees on the basics of democracy. Now 17 worker representatives meet monthly with company managers, says Chief Operating Officer Rick Heroux.

Thailand is the world's top exporter of canned tuna, with sales abroad of \$2.3 billion and a 20 percent market share. The biggest canner, Thai Union Frozen Products, owns Chicken of the Sea; it's been waiting since December for approval from U.S. antitrust regulators to buy Bumble Bee for \$1.5 billion.

The pressure is building on the industry to clean up questionable labor practices. Four out of five workers in the canneries are foreign, part of an economic web of some 4 million migrants employed in Thailand's factories, fishing fleets, and brothels. Last June, just after the coup, the annual U.S. report on human trafficking downgraded Thailand to Tier 3, the worst level, for nations that don't meet the minimum standards to protect workers as laid out in the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Tier 1 nations are the best, while Tier 2 countries either are making progress but have a way to go or are being watched for signs of backsliding. Thailand joined Iran, North Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, among others, in Tier 3. Many migrants in Thailand are undocumented. The

U.S. Department of State said in its report that they are often “forced, coerced, or defrauded into labor or exploited in the sex trade.” Chotiwat and Thai Union say they adhere to strict labor codes.

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Migrants in Thailand working in the country’s underground economy

The downgrade has damaged Thailand’s reputation, increasing pressure from retailers such as Carrefour, Target, and Tesco—all wholesale buyers of Thai canned tuna—to improve worker protections, says Max Tunon, senior programme officer in Bangkok with the International Labour Organization, which monitors worker conditions worldwide. “There’s concern,” he says, that “buyers might be looking elsewhere.”

In his weekly address on Feb. 27, General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the prime minister, said the government places “great importance” on fighting trafficking. His regime has set up centers where migrant workers can receive legal working papers. The government has extended until June a deadline for neighboring countries to verify the nationalities of undocumented workers. Canners now limit overtime to two hours a day, down from as many as five. Companies are making it easier for workers to send money home, says Thai Tuna Industry Association President Chanintr Chalisarapong. Tier 3 status prompted “us to improve our working conditions,” he says.

Providing papers to workers is “a huge deal,” says Jeffrey Labovitz, the head of the Thailand office of the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration. Papers make arbitrary detention more difficult while also helping foreigners gain access to public health care. The canneries have also cut down on child labor, says Andy Hall, international affairs adviser for the Migrant Worker Rights Network. “There’s an awareness they need to engage,” he says.

Critics in the U.S. are less impressed. There’s been some progress in registering migrant workers, says Abby McGill, campaigns director for the International Labor Rights Forum, a Washington-based nonprofit. But the Thais haven’t addressed the crushing debt loads that workers take on to pay the agents who land them jobs. Until these practices change, she says, “Thailand should remain on Tier 3.”

On March 16 the U.S. chargé d’affaires in Bangkok met with the Thai labor minister to discuss the Tier 3 designation. The dialogue “is a good sign for Thailand” in its drive to get off the blacklist, the Ministry of Labor said in a statement. Thailand, says U.S. State Department spokesperson Pooja Jhunjhunwala, still needs “significantly greater steps to protect the rights of migrant workers.”

—*With Suttinee Yuvejwattana and Josh Eidelson*

The bottom line: *The U.S. State Department is pressing Thailand to address human trafficking in its factories, fishing fleets, and brothels.*