

[The Opinion Pages](#) | Editorial

Human Trafficking on Trial in Thailand

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#) MARCH 25, 2016

The first witness in the largest human-trafficking trial in Thai history was called to testify last week in a court in Bangkok. The witness, a Rohingya Muslim from Myanmar, told of being beaten and starved by gun-toting captors on the boat that ferried him and more than 200 others to a trafficking camp in Thailand.

That witness is lucky to be alive: The trial was sparked by the grim discovery last May of a mass grave containing more than 30 bodies in a trafficking camp in southern Thailand. Faced with international outrage — and the lowest ranking on the State Department’s [2015 Trafficking in Persons report](#) — the Thai government suddenly cracked down on trafficking rings in the region. Unfortunately, that created another catastrophe when thousands of people being held on the boats were abandoned at sea by panicked traffickers.

Traffickers in Thailand profit from Rohingya fleeing persecution in Myanmar, Bangladeshis seeking work, and women and girls sold into the sex trade. Thailand’s multibillion-dollar fishing industry is also a powerful magnet for trafficking, with victims enslaved on commercial fishing boats. Last month, President Obama signed legislation effectively [banning American imports](#) of fish caught by slave labor.

The human-trafficking trial is an opportunity for Thailand to end the impunity that has allowed traffickers, and the officials who collude with them, to operate freely. The 92 defendants in the current trial include politicians, police officers and Lt. Gen. Manas Kongpaen, a senior army officer based in southern Thailand.

With the trial expected to last until the end of this year, the government must ensure the safety of the witnesses. Last December, the top investigator in the case, Maj. Gen. Paween Pongsirin, [fled Thailand](#), saying he feared for his life after uncovering the involvement of senior military officers and other “influential people.”

Some 3.7 million people have fled to Thailand, including an estimated 130,000 refugees. Thailand has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and classifies all refugees as illegal migrants with no right to work legally, making them vulnerable to traffickers. It is time for Thailand to reform its asylum framework. That, together with justice for victims and reforms in the fishing industry, is the only way to end the unconscionable tragedy of human trafficking in Thailand.