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Hopes That New U.S. Measures Will Cut Slavery from Global Supply Chains

Forced labor generates about \$150 billion a year, according to an estimate by the International Labor Organization.

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Migrant workers work on fishing boats at a pier in Prachuabkhirkhan province, southern Thailand Tuesday, March 4, 2014. An environmental and human rights group charged Tuesday that Thailand is not adequately addressing severe abuse against migrant workers in the Thai fishing industry. (AP Photo/Apichart Weerawong)

Ten Sokstreith, VOA Khmer

07 March 2016

WASHINGTON DC—The U.S. government recently closed a loophole that was allowing goods tied to forced labor to be imported and sold to consumers. Many hope the new legislation will lead profits to dry up for businesses that depend on human trafficking, and in turn free more victims from slavery.

The legislation, signed into law by President Barack Obama on Feb. 24, closes an 85-year-old legal opening, which had exempted from anti-slavery rules imported goods that the United States could not produce itself.

This and other measures signaled recently by the United States are expected to strengthen the scrutiny on imported goods that may have been sourced from

supply chains tainted by slavery, including from the Thai fishing industry,

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which employs many Cambodian migrant workers. But enforcement will be all important, given the vast profits thought to be derived from forced labor—about \$150 billion a year, according to an estimate by the International Labor Organization.

Karen Stauss, director of programs at the organization Free the Slaves, said the new law sent a strong message that goods made by slaves are no longer welcome in the U.S. market. “They [companies] must do more of their own due diligence processes to ensure that there is no slavery or human trafficking tied to such products that they wish to sell in the United States,” she said.

The new measure could encourage Thai seafood companies, for example, to change their business behaviors, she said. “The incentive for them is to change their behavior so that they can continue to sell their products in a market that no longer wants to tolerate the presence of slavery within items they are selling,” said Stauss.

The repeal of the loophole has been a long time coming, says David Abramowitz, vice president for policy and government relations at the non-profit Humanity United and a former chief counsel to the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee.

“It has been a major advocacy goal of a number of organizations and civil society in the United States. And if the U.S. government follows up on this bill, and implements well, it could really make the difference all around the world,” he said in an interview with VOA Khmer.

The new law would allow the U.S. government “additional diplomatic pressure” to promote human dignity as a principal of doing business around the world, he said. This would also be promoted through the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a new free trade scheme that includes three Southeast Asian countries, he said. “There is a specific provision which requires all countries that join the TPP to discourage to the import of goods made of forced labor,” said Abramowitz.

Annick Febrey, senior associate for the group Human Rights First’s anti-trafficking campaign, said that stronger enforcement would likely follow the legal change. “Our hope is that this new legislation, once it is enforced, will start to dry up some of the profit for the perpetrators who are trafficking people into the industry, such as fishing in Thailand,” Febrey said.

Thailand is one of the world’s largest seafood suppliers, exporting in large quantities to the United States and the European Union. Investigations last year led to calls for the Thai government to crack down on forced labor. Hundreds of Cambodians, Burmese and Bangladeshi workers were rescued from Thai-registered boats and from an Indonesian island where some had fled from their abusive captains.

Chum Phally, advocacy and policy advisor to Winrock International’s countering trafficking-in-persons program for Cambodia, praised the collective international intervention against slavery in supply chains. Going forward, he said, uniform monitoring and enforcement was needed.

“International intervention is one of the effective measures to protect workers’ rights, especially those immigrant workers such as those trapped on Thai boats,” he said. “And I believe the U.S. legislation to close the loophole will continue to contribute to the fight against human trafficking and forced labor in developing countries.”

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But holding perpetrators accountable is a challenge given the nature of global supply chains, Febrey said. For those who benefit from forced labor, it's a very low-risk crime. Last year, an estimated 23.9 million people were employed in unfree conditions, but only about 4,000 convictions were made in courts worldwide. "So we need to make it more risky for the perpetrators," Febrey said, "and that will begin to dry up the profit, in order to put that into the equation."

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