

<http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/06/30/484209299/controversy-over-thailands-new-tier-in-human-trafficking-report>

Controversy Follows Thailand's New Ranking In Human Trafficking Report

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A police officer inspects a fishing boat in Thailand.

Dario Pignatelli/Bloomberg via Getty Images

The U.S. State Department issued its annual [Trafficking in Persons](#) report on Thursday, and the big news is the status of Thailand.

Thailand is now on the "Tier 2 Watch List" for countries that do not meet the minimum U.S. standards for the elimination of trafficking, but are making significant efforts to do so. Last year it was on the "Tier 3" list of the worst human trafficking offenders — countries making no significant effort to meet minimum U.S. standards. That list includes Burma, Haiti, Iran, North Korea, South Sudan, Syria and Venezuela.

Thailand's fishing and seafood industries have been accused of forcing thousands of men from Burma and other countries to work against their will for long hours and little pay.

According to the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, these laborers are victims of human trafficking, defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a

person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery."

The TIP report, which is used as a reference by other governments and international groups, says Thailand has made steps in the right direction. Its government amended its 2008 anti-trafficking laws. Changes include providing legal protection for whistleblowers and giving the government authority to close businesses involved in forced labor.

The government convicted 241 traffickers in 2015 compared to 104 in 2014, says the report, and conducted 72 investigations of cases of forced labor compared to 58 in 2014.

Still, the report says, trafficking in the seafood sector remains a big concern.

[Brad Adams](#), Asia director of [Human Rights Watch](#), acknowledges that Thailand has made some progress in the past year, but in his view the changes have been superficial. "Anyone who knows the situation knows Thailand is just scratching the surface," he says. He believes major legal and regulatory changes to stop trafficking still need to be instituted.

"We haven't seen senior people — significant figures in the military and police — held accountable," he says. "We haven't seen [the government] going after the financial sector. The labor for Thai fishing boats and sex trafficking is a major business."

NPR asked the State Department to respond to criticisms from Adams and others that the upgrade was intended to [smooth relations](#) with Thailand's government. In an email, the State Department replied that it evaluates human trafficking "efforts based on criteria established under U.S. law, independent of political developments."

In this year's report, the U.S. downgraded 27 countries and upgraded 20 countries in the three-tier ranking system. And there were 18,930 prosecutions of human traffickers reported in 2015 compared to 10,051 in 2014.