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Thai vigilantes take up fight against human trafficking

Friday, 30 Jan 2015 | 1:02 AM ET Reuters



Nicolas Asfour | AFP | Getty Images

Migrant laborers at work on the pier in front of a Thai fishing boat in Sattahip, Thailand's Rayong province in 2011

Bullet-proof vest, shotgun, sunglasses: Kompat Sompaorat could be mistaken for a member of a SWAT team.

He actually belongs to a motley group of Thai civilians who, frustrated by their government's lackluster response to human trafficking, have taken up arms to patrol one of Asia's busiest smuggling routes.

For three months now, scores of volunteers have patrolled the estuaries and jungles of Phang Nga province, a popular tourist destination in southern Thailand a short drive from the famous resort island of Phuket.

They are motivated by humanitarian concerns, they say, but also worry that the presence of armed smugglers and impoverished refugees in the vicinity could lead to an increase in crime and scare away tourists.

"There are big big guys behind this trade - so big we can't do anything about it. We can't touch them," said Kompat, as the volunteers arrive at an abandoned smuggling camp near the village of Ban Bang Yai strewn with children's shoes, women's camisoles and trash.

"We can only try to save their victims," he said.

Despite pledges by Thailand's military junta to combat human trafficking, the volunteers say the influx of illegal migrants is growing, many of them Rohingya Muslims from western Myanmar, and little is being done to stop the gangs that transport and abuse them.

Every year, thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshi boat people arrive in Thailand, brought by the smugglers. They are then taken by road to desolate camps, where traffickers demand a ransom to smuggle them south across the border to Malaysia.

Last year Thailand was downgraded to the lowest tier on the U.S. State Department's influential Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, which annually ranks countries by their counter-trafficking efforts.

The Thai government, installed after a military coup last May, has vowed to improve its record, and is to submit a report to the State Department detailing its progress.

Sek Wannamethee, spokesman for Thailand's foreign affairs ministry, said locals in southern Thailand were being encouraged to be the "eyes and ears" of the local government.

"Fostering partnership, especially with the locals, has proved to help detecting illegal activities and can greatly aid the investigation," said Sek. "But of course, law enforcement and administration still remains the responsibility of the law enforcement officials and local authorities."

The Bangkok-based Fortify Rights group said it was "very concerning" that armed volunteers were taking on the traffickers.

"Clearly it's an indication that authorities are not fulfilling their duty to combat trafficking," Matthew Smith, the group's executive director, said in an interview.

Well-oiled networks

Reuters reporters joined the volunteers - mainly fishermen and other villagers - on one of their near-daily patrols for boat people who might be hiding along the coast.

The group has limited funds and poor equipment compared to the wealthy and well-oiled smuggling networks, said Jessada Thattan, another volunteer.

"Mostly we are slower than them. They use better boats than us," said Jessada.

The volunteers are partly funded by Takua Pa district, but some costs, particularly gasoline, come from their own pockets.

Volunteers said they had yet to catch any smugglers or traffickers. But they have discovered more than 220 Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis over the past three months and handed them over to immigration police.

Additionally, more than 130 suspected trafficking victims, mostly Bangladeshis, were found dumped by traffickers in a remote coastal area of Phang Nga. Many of them had been abducted or tricked onto prison ships in the Bay of Bengal where conditions resembled the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Reuters reported in October.

One group was sick, half-starved and dehydrated by the time volunteers found them.

Smugglers, the volunteers said, once hid groups of 300 to 500 Rohingya on the islands that dot the district, but have now grown more cautious.

"The smugglers' tactics are changing," said Jessada. "Before we would find groups of 100 together on an island. Now, the smugglers break them up in to groups of 10 or 20 to make it easier to hide and transport them."

Local people were slowly coming on board to help establish a network of anti-smuggling informants, said Jessada.

"Almost 100 percent of the fishermen in the area are on our side now," he said. "They let us know if there are suspicious activities on the islands or if someone is making a large delivery of food to a remote area."

Despite the enormity of the task, the volunteers said they were being spurred on by the disconnect between government policy and practice.

"The government can announce as many anti-trafficking policies it wants," said Cherdchai Papattamayutanon, a village chief in Takua Pa who helped form the group. "The truth is, we're at the frontline here and we're alone."