



ILO issues report on Thai fishing industry

An International Labor Organization survey has found the vast majority of those employed in Thailand's fishing industry are working voluntarily, although some degree of forced labor and serious abuses do exist. The ILO's report counters claims by some activist groups that most of those working on Thai fishing trawlers are victims of trafficking and held in a modern-day form of slavery.

The ILO and Chulalongkorn University collaborated on the 105-page report "Employment Practices and Working Conditions in Thailand's Fishing Sector," which was released last week. It is the ILO's first thorough study of the Thai fishing industry, which has come under increased scrutiny and criticism in recent years.

"We could not say that forced labor is the main feature in the Thai fishing industry," ILO Senior Program Officer Max Tunon told reporters at a press conference for the release of the report.

The report noted progress by stakeholders in treatment of workers, but urged them to do more to protect employees vulnerable to exploitation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has convened several meetings between government departments, fishing business owners, and labor and human rights activists to discuss the problems in the industry and develop approaches to rectifying them.

The Ministry of Labor is setting up seven centers in Thailand where those working in the industry, and other migrant workers, can receive assistance. The centers will also help source workers to give business owners an alternative to private labor recruiters who may be finding workers through human trafficking networks. Tunon said that he hoped the centers would be opened soon, as they could reduce the numbers of workers being supplied by traffickers.

Of the 596 workers interviewed, 83 percent said they were working in their jobs by choice, while 17 percent said they were working against their will. Threats of penalties prevented them from leaving, the report said.

Of those interviewed, 306 were from Myanmar, 241 were from Cambodia and 49 were Thai. Tunon said that 5.4 percent of the workers said they had been deceived or coerced by others into working in the fishing industry. Furthermore, the survey found 33 children under the age of 18 working on fishing vessels. Seven were under 15 years old, and 26 were aged 15-17.



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The report also documented other serious abuses such as threats of violence. Tunon said, however, that the study focused on those who worked on short-haul boats, which were at sea for a few days or weeks. He said he believed the worst abuses are probably taking place on long-haul boats that are at sea for months at a time.

Thailand's government has pledged to do more to prevent abuses in the fishing industry, and as the ILO report notes, is already implementing several measures. Independent monitoring from groups such as the ILO and Chulalongkorn University is valuable in pinpointing gaps in programs and enforcement that the authorities need to address.