



New labor minister vows crackdown on illegal labor

Thailand's recently appointed Minister of Labor has vowed to crack down on companies employing illegal workers and child labor. Chalerm Yubamroong said that the government has made these issues a priority, and that he will "go all out" to have Thailand removed from a United States watch list on human trafficking.



Chalerm, who made the comments during his first meeting with ministry staff last week, is a former deputy prime minister and police captain. He has served in several governments during the past two decades, and from his time as a member of the Royal Thai Police has strong knowledge and experience in law enforcement issues. He has also served as Chairman of Thailand's National Committee on the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking.

Thailand has been named by the United States Department of State as one of several countries that have not taken strong enough action to stop human trafficking. The Kingdom needs to improve its record in this area, the State Department has said, or it could face possible sanctions from the U.S. next year.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra recognizes the seriousness of the issue and it was raised during talks with President Barack Obama during his visit to Bangkok last year. The two discussed cooperation on a range of transnational crime and security matters, along with stepping up trade, investment and economic ties.

Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been actively involved in trying to find solutions to this problem, organizing **working groups** consisting of various **ministries** – including the Ministry of Labor – private businesses and **nongovernmental organizations**.

The fishing industry in particular is plagued by this problem. Earlier this year, the Ministry of Labor opened seven centers for migrants so they can be registered, afforded legal protections and serve as a pool for fishing, seafood and other companies that want to source workers and avoid traffickers. Migrants, especially illegal migrants, are often fearful and mistrustful of the authorities in their host countries, and so some may not take advantage of services and centers intended to provide them with better protections and opportunities.

New Minister Chalerm said he would have police and his ministry focus immediately on Samut Sakhon, a province near Bangkok that is a center for the fishing industry and also home to large

number of migrants from Myanmar. During a visit to Bangkok last year, Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi met with then Deputy Prime Minister Chalerm and appealed to the Thai government to provide better protections for Myanmar workers. Chalerm promised her the government would take steps to do so.

Human trafficking is a complex problem for many countries, including Thailand. The Kingdom is particularly prone to this crime because of a number of factors. Thailand's economy is more developed and its living standards higher than in most neighboring countries, and this attracts migrants, many of whom enter Thailand illegally and some of whom fall into the grip of criminal gangs engaged in people smuggling. The Kingdom's long borders are difficult to patrol and therefore relatively porous.

The criminal gangs engaged in human trafficking are transnational in nature and also smuggle arms, narcotics, wildlife and other **contraband**. They are well organized and have circles of influence in many countries.

Because living standards are rising in Thailand, the pool of Thai workers willing to take low-wage **jobs** is shrinking, leaving employers with hard decisions about whether to open their doors to migrants who may not be legal. While some employers may be complicit in sourcing workers from traffickers, many are unaware of how migrants working for them made their way to Thailand.