



## Thai police rescue 29 Myanmar victims of trafficking

In an operation that demonstrated growing cooperation between Thai and Myanmar authorities, Thai police freed 14 Myanmar **nationals** from human traffickers in the southern province of Trang last week and arrested one trafficker from Myanmar, according to The Irrawaddy, a news website on Myanmar affairs based in Thailand.



The raid last week followed a similar operation on March 10 in which 15 Myanmar nationals were rescued from traffickers. Thai police said they have rescued about 50 Myanmar nationals since the beginning of the year. The raids were led by the Department of Special Investigations, Thailand's equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States. The DSI rescue mission was launched in cooperation with Myanmar's Ministry of Labor and two **nongovernmental organizations**, the Myanmar Association Thailand and the Foundation for Educational Development.

Those rescued in the most recent raid were mostly young men in their 20s, although a few were as young as 16. They said they had been recruited by brokers who told them they would be working in a chicken processing plant with a salary of US\$330 a month. Instead they were sold into the fishing industry.

Whereas labor and human rights groups have claimed that abuses are widespread in the fishing industry, Thai authorities have stepped up efforts to tackle the problem with high-level political commitment. When Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi pressed the Thai government on the issue during her visit to Bangkok to attend the World Economic Forum East Asia, she received assurances from Deputy Prime Minister Chalerm Yubamrung that the Thai government would step up its efforts against traffickers and do more to protect workers from Myanmar in Thailand. Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra also affirmed the government's commitment in her statement to the UN General Assembly and also during President Obama's visit to Thailand last November.

Thai agencies concerned, including the **Ministries** of Labor, Agriculture, Social Welfare, and Foreign Affairs as well as law enforcement agencies have been working together in efforts to examine and address problems related to trafficking and labor abuse, and find solutions. Thai seafood companies, fishing fleet operators, labor recruiters, and nongovernmental organizations have also been brought in. Together, they have agreed upon codes of conduct and reforming recruitment methods to try and eliminate companies sourcing workers from traffickers or unscrupulous brokers. On 1 March 2013,

Thai foreign minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul, along with the **ministers** of labor and of SoCal velopment and human security, and the police commissioner, met with Thai governmental agencies and NGOs working in the field of human trafficking to discuss how to enhance cooperation.

The DSI and other **security agencies** have pledged to put traffickers behind bars. Human trafficking, however, is a highly organized activity of criminal syndicates and presents significant challenges to law enforcement. Victims and witnesses are often frightened and intimidated. Nonetheless, Thailand's government and security agencies have shown a greater determination to arrest and prosecute traffickers. Despite the risks, more than 1.2 million migrants from Myanmar are working in Thailand, many of them illegally, according to government estimates.