



Thailand affirms commitment to eliminate forced labor



International
Labour
Organization

Thailand joined consensus to support a protocol against forced labor put forward by the International Labor Organization (ILO), as authorities arrested another Myanmar national for trafficking in persons. Meanwhile, the country's largest agro-industrial firm disputed allegations in a British newspaper story that its shrimp products are the result of forced labor.

The Thai delegation in Geneva informed the meeting of the ILO Governing Body last week that it joined the consensus in adopting the said Protocol, underscoring the country's strong commitment to eliminate forced or compulsory labor, after it had initially balked because of its binding nature. Although it had supported the protocol in principle, the delegation was concerned the country might not be able to pass necessary laws and create proper reporting instruments in time to comply with the ILO.

"We don't want to send a wrong signal to the international community but wanted to cooperate with the ILO on the matter," said Thani Thongphakdi, Thailand's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

As part of efforts to eliminate forced labor and trafficking in persons, police in Phuket arrested a Myanmar national, Ao Mo, for allegedly selling four of his countrymen to work as slaves on fishing boats for roughly US\$650 dollars each. The arrest came less than two weeks after police in Bangkok arrested other Myanmar nationals running a trafficking ring. The arrests were the latest in a stepped-up war on traffickers. In a clear demonstration of Thailand's increased commitment to combat human trafficking, last year 225 traffickers were convicted and sentenced to prison, a four-fold increase from 2012.

Ao Mo was apprehended in a sting operation after families of some of the victims complained to the authorities. In years gone by, victims and their families rarely turned to police, but Thai authorities have been working to create trust as part of their multi-pronged approach to eliminating trafficking in persons.

Also last week, Charoen Pokphand Foods (CPF) responded to allegations made in an article in The Guardian newspaper that accused the company of buying shrimp from fishing boats on which illegal migrants are

allegedly held as slaves. The paper also accused Walmart, Carrefour, Costco, Tesco and other customers of CPF of being complicit in the use of forced labor.

CPF, a division of agro-industrial giant Charoen Pokphand Group (CP), insisted that no forced labor is being used in the company.

“Fundamentally, CP believes that from factory to fishing boat each and every person who works for CP, with CP as a supplier or through any part of CP's supply chain must, as an absolute minimum be treated fairly and with dignity at all times,” the company said in the statement.

Seafood importers in the U.S. have spoken out against calls by labor activists for the State Department to downgrade Thailand's ranking on its watch list for trafficking in persons because of forced labor in the fishing industry.

“Painting the entire industry with a broad sweeping bush does an injustice to those that treat their workers fairly,” said Brian Wynn, chairman of Rubicon Resources, a leading importer of shrimp to North America, as well as a member of the National Fisheries Institute's executive committee.