



A Ukrainian engineer who says he was held captive and forced to work at a Bangkok factory for 14 years will meet Department of Special Investigation officers tomorrow to detail his allegations.

Anatoliy Vdovychenko, 57, was rescued from the Thai-owned oxygen equipment factory located at the Rangsit industrial complex on Jan 11 after Ukrainian consular staff confronted the owner and threatened to call police.

Ukrainian consul Constantine Ivaschenko said they became involved in the case after a Burmese worker who had left the factory sent a letter to the engineer's family in Ukraine last November telling them of the engineer's fate. The letter also included three telephone contact numbers.

Family members contacted Interpol and local police who then contacted the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior Affairs which informed the embassy in Bangkok. Consular staff phoned the numbers provided in the letter and found the Burmese man who told them where the factory was located.

"I thought I would be there forever," said Mr Vdovychenko, who is slender in appearance and seems emotionally unsettled by his ordeal. "I thought I would die and nobody would know. My mind was closed and I was depressed.

"I stayed for many years in a small dirty room without pay. I worked hard for nothing, They didn't pay my salary and they forced me to work.

"They took my documents and I had to do everything free of charge. The owner didn't need a welder, painter, electrician or plumber. I had to do everything."

His daughter Natalia, 34, who works for a corporate law firm in Odessa, said in a telephone interview they had been searching for their father for 15 years but the task was difficult. "At first we had no chance to do anything as we knew he was in Thailand, but at the time there was no Ukrainian embassy there." She said it was a "strange feeling" talking to her father after 15 years. "Of course we are waiting for him to come back, but it's a long time and things have changed. We are already adults now and everything has changed."

Mr Ivaschenko said Mr Vdovychenko had been isolated for so long that the first time he met the engineer he had almost forgotten his mother tongue.

Mr Vdovychenko, who is in the care of the Ukrainian embassy, has been granted special permission by the Immigration Department to stay in Thailand until the end of next month. His passport expired in 2006.

In an affidavit submitted at Klong Luan police station, Mr Vdovychenko says he arrived in April 1996 as a specialist in oxygen equipment installation for Combitec Corporation Ltd which was the agent for a Ukrainian supplier, Kisenmash.

After suffering burns in an accident in July 1996 and being unable to return home, he was verbally offered a work agreement by a Thai factory owner which included a 30,000 baht

monthly salary, plus a car and other expenses, including medical expenses.

Mr Vdovychenko said that without his consent, the owner planned to build a new oxygen factory and he would have to maintain two oxygen systems. He said he only received a full salary for the first three months. By the end of 1998 he made a demand on his employer for 600,000 baht in outstanding pay.

After that, the owner stopped paying him and confiscated his passport when Mr Vdovychenko returned from a trip to Malaysia in 1998.

Over the next 12 years, he says he was only paid from "time to time", sometimes receiving 1,000 baht a week to buy food and nothing more.

"During a long period I did not have my passport and I did not have money to even buy food," he says in the affidavit.

Mr Vdovychenko told the Bangkok Post Sunday that he was under 24-hour guard and only allowed to leave the premises to buy food from a stall near the factory.

He said on occasions the owner threatened to kill him and sometimes fired a handgun in the air to intimidate him. He said he was too afraid to attempt an escape as the guard would act on the owner's orders as he was considered crucial to the running of the factory.

"I was alone, I had no friends and no passport. If I left, who would believe me?" he said.

Mr Ivaschenko said that while Mr Vdovychenko was not "chained like a dog", "he's not Rambo, he's not Superman, he's a specialist engineer".

Mr Vdovychenko said he survived with the help of Burmese migrant workers at the factory who brought him food and clothing.

He had no television or radio, and the one Russian-language book he had was torn up by the factory owner. However, other workers were also recruited to keep him under surveillance.

Paisith Sungkahapong, who heads the DSI's Foreign Affairs Division, said he would meet Mr Vdovychenko tomorrow to determine whether or not to proceed with a criminal case against the factory owner. "I've never heard of a case like this. Fourteen years is a very long time," said Pol Lt Col Paisith.

Mr Vdovychenko says he remains fearful of the factory owner but wants to be paid the money owing to him.

From:

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/world/217653/ukrainian-says-he-was-held-captive-for-14-years>