



Thousands of men from Myanmar and Cambodia set sail on Thai fishing boats every day, but many are unwilling seafarers -- slaves forced to work in brutal conditions under threat of death.

The day Hla Myint saw the sea for the first time was when traffickers delivered him, after a week's trek through the jungle from Myanmar, to a ship on Thailand's coast.

He said it was the beginning of seven months of "hell", during which there were beatings "every day, every hour".

His is one of a multitude of stories of slavery in Thailand's multi-million dollar fishing industry, which campaigners say relies on forced labour to provide seafood for restaurants and supermarkets around the world.

Hla Myint decided to escape — throwing himself into choppy waters and clinging to a life buoy for five hours before reaching land — after seeing his captain kill a crewmate.

The man, who had been caught trying to escape, was savagely beaten and tortured in front of the rest of the fishermen.

“Later they took him to the back of the ship, stood him on the edge and shot him in the head. My heart pounded so hard when I saw that,” said Hla Myint, whose name AFP has changed to protect his identity.

Now he works with a local aid group helping others to flee.

He told his story to AFP during a dash to rescue four young Myanmar men hiding in bushes near the coastal town of Rayong, just hours after they broke out of a locked room and ran for their lives.

“They threatened that if we tried to run away, one bullet cost only 25 baht (\$0.83),” said Myo Oo, 20, whose name has also been changed.

Another member of the group, a teenager clearly still petrified, described beatings with the butt of a gun.

The UN recently acknowledged Thailand’s “significant progress” in efforts to tackle trafficking, but said it needed to go further and warned that trafficking of forced labour in the fishing industry was “growing in scale”.



Sirirat Ayuwathana of Thailand’s Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, which is in charge of tackling trafficking in the country, said authorities were aware of the problem and planned to set up a commission to work on registering all fishing boats and crew members.

“We cannot know what happens when the boats leave the shore. The workers could be tortured or detained. The captains have total control of the boat, and they may mistreat these people,” she said.

Life on the boats is incredibly hard. Men toil for up to 20 hours a day, seven days a week, only able to snatch a few moments for food and rest between hauling nets, according to a report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

Some boats use “mother ships” to refuel and take on new crew to avoid returning to land and many fishermen spend months or even years trapped in waters as far away as Somalia, the IOM said.

Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch, who wrote the report, said marine police in one Thai coastal area told him they found up to 10 bodies a month washed up on the shore.

In a 2009 study, more than half of Cambodian migrants trafficked onto Thai boats surveyed by the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) said they had seen their captains killing one of their colleagues.

But Mana Sripitak, of the National Fisheries Association of Thailand, said it was “impossible” that forced labour was used, saying migrants were willing workers.

The Thai fishing industry is a lucrative business. According to official figures, 16.95 billion baht (\$565 million) worth of fish was hauled into Thailand from the sea in 2010.

China, the European Union, the United States and Japan were among the major export destinations.

There are 35,000 migrants officially registered as working on the boats, mostly from Myanmar, also known as Burma, and Cambodia. But campaigners say poor working conditions put off

Thai seafarers, so captains use trafficking victims to restock their crews.

Robertson said thousands of people had been trafficked onto boats over the last decade.

“This has been essentially a lawless industry for years and within that the system of brokers and trafficking has grown up as the defacto model for a fishing boat captain... They know who to call,” he said.

He urged governments and consumers to boycott wild-caught fish from Thailand unless the industry reforms.



The US State Department has placed Thailand on a trafficking in persons “watchlist” for two years running.

It estimates there are tens of thousands of people caught in a web of trafficking across the country — in various types of forced labour and sexual exploitation.

On a recent visit to Thailand UN special rapporteur on people trafficking, Joy Ngozi Ezeilo, said the country was not doing enough to curb the trade.

“The immunity of traffickers, especially the collusion with the official law enforcement agencies, is really diluting the government’s effort and efficacy of its policies and programmes to combat human trafficking,” she told AFP.

Andy Hall, a migration expert at Mahidol University, said Thailand should take responsibility for staunching the flow of trafficked labour.

“Without these people the fish don’t get caught, the products don’t get made. They are lost in a globalisation process, they are lost in an industrialisation process, it’s really scary,” he said.

Myo Oo paid a broker 1,000 baht (\$33) to take him into Thailand, hoping to find factory work for himself and his 16-year-old brother in Bangkok, where his two sisters already live.

After five days in the jungle, the brothers were crammed into a truck and driven to Rayong, where they were separated. Barely more than a boy himself, Myo Oo fears for his teenage brother and is doubtful of his chances in trying to flee the boats.

He said they knew they would face challenges in Thailand, “but in reality it is much more difficult. I never expected I would have to be so worried about my life”.

But he was reluctant to be identified by Thai authorities, who would inevitably deport him, and determined to try again to find work.

Once in Bangkok, Myo Oo and the others slipped away, carrying little but the clothes on their backs and hope for a better life.

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