

New Life and New Chance: Thai Union Gives a Fresh Start for Victims of Human Trafficking



As part of a pilot program with the Labor Rights Promotion Network (LPN), a Thailand-based NGO, Thai Union is helping to deliver counselling, medical assistance, temporary food and shelter and the opportunity for legal aid for repatriated Thai nationals who have been rescued from slave labor camps. This gives Thai Union the opportunity to provide for those who have been victims of human trafficking and allow the company to be part of the solution in order to help better the seafood industry as a whole.

IMPRISONED

A group of Thai nationals fell victim to human traffickers and were sold to slave labor camps on the Indonesian islands of Benjina and Ambon. They were rescued from the camps along with fellow victims from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Previously, their attempt to escape had been unsuccessful due to forged Seaman's Books.

It was later learned that the majority of these victims had been lured by recruiters who trafficked them to several holding sites before forcing them on to boats in Samut Sakhon, Samut Prakan and Songkhla provinces.

Upon repatriation, the Thai victims were taken into the care of the Labour Rights Promotion Network (LPN). A representative for the LPN reported on the incident and stated: *"The recruiters told them that working on fishing boats made good money and not so laborious since it only involved fish sorting. However, in reality, the working conditions were harsh, many were beaten and no one received agreed upon wages. Any crew who got caught trying to contact the Thai Embassy in Jakarta got thrown into cells and was beaten up by the Captain."*

Many of the rescued Thais returned to their original homes, but some requested support from LPN and stayed at the LPN temporary shelter hoping to fulfill their original plan of finding work.

THE NEW START

Seven of the rescued men were accepted for work at Thai Union after passing a preliminary medical and mental assessment. Physical abuse on the boats took their toll on some of the men's long-term health, with one man in particular suffering permanent blindness to one eye. After this assessment, the rescued men were all given a thorough medical check-up at the hospital, with Thai Union taking care of the bill, which included treatment or rehabilitation if any was required.

Thai Union also offered to help the rescued men find accommodation and covered their rental fees for the first month. Then, in August 2015, the men began work in the fish production department at Thai Union. As with all employees at the company, the men were given uniforms and orientation with regards to the regulations and welfare prior to starting work. We hope that for these men, the opportunity to restart their livelihoods with fair wages will help to provide for their families and ensure that they stay clear of the temptations offered by recruiters of human traffickers.

The fishing industry continues to face many challenges and it falls to Thai Union, as a global seafood leader, to recognize the need for positive changes in society and the industry at large. This understanding is the basis for working with Project ISSARA, a public-private sector platform which aims to tackle human trafficking in Southeast Asia, with a focus in particular on forced labor in Thailand. This project offers a multilingual 24-hour hotline for anyone who wants to report human trafficking violations, and Thai Union has been working with them to help promote the hotline and alleviate human trafficking and human rights violations in supply chains around the world. Thai Union strongly supports the hotline and work of Project ISSARA, and as such, has ensured that there is information about Project ISSARA in 5 factories and 1 port across Thailand. This is key example of Thai Union's commitment to work with civil society organizations in order to fight for the human rights of the people in our industry and offering them the opportunity for better lives.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Mr. Sompong Sakaew, Director of LPN, said:

“I am pleased that Thai Union Group has offered to help these rescued Thai fishing crew workers, providing them with a good job, fair pay and welfare benefits so that they are able to start a new life. They are no longer in forced or involuntary work, as the labor management at Thai Union is well up to standards

For the last several years, LPN has been working with Thai Union on many collaborative projects, such as promoting education for migrant children in Thai government schools to prevent child labor; promoting basic human rights and labor rights for migrant workers in workplaces and through the provision of rights to association and harmonious living within communities. Most recently they are assisting rescued Thai fishing workers from their hardships in Indonesia through the provision of employment.

Thai Union has shown continuous commitment to developing fair labor practices and as a result, some of the rescued Thai workers are now working at Thai Union, earning decent wages and enjoying an improved quality of life. Thai Union’s actions are a great example to follow.”



Mr. Thongdee is a native of Ubon Ratchathani province in north-east Thailand and was seeking work in Bangkok. A recruiter in Hua Lam phong Station (Bangkok’s main train terminal) offered him a job to sort fish in Indonesia, stating that he could earn 300,000 upon arrival. In reality, the employer refused to pay him until he had worked for 3 months and the pay, while in fact totaling 300,000 turned out to 300,000 Indonesian Rupiah, a mere 800 Thai Baht (USD 22). He reported that he had to get up at 4am to work and was

forced to work even when seriously sick. Mr. Thongdee managed to escape when the boat docked. Later he heard news of fellow Thai crew being rescued and joined them in hope of receiving help to return home himself. He was repatriated on 9 April 2015.



Mr. Juan was a construction worker from Sukhothai province before being recruited by the promise of good pay and good work, although he had no idea what kind of work was offered until he saw a Seaman's Book. He said that working and living conditions on the fishing boat were very harsh and when he begged the Captain to return home he was beaten on the back with a steel pipe. He also said that because of his back injury he could no longer lift anything more weighing than 30 kilograms.

Mr. Surasak is from Samut Sakhon province and was told by a recruiter that working on Indonesian boat would earn him 400-500 Thai Baht a day. In reality, he was paid only 9,000 Thai Baht a month, but the fact that he was paid at all make him one of the more fortunate members of this group. When he heard that fellow Thais were being rescued this year, he managed to join them so he would be able to receive assistance to return home. He was repatriated on 29 May 2015.



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