

# AP



Dita Alangkara • AP Photo

**Migrant fishermen raise their hands as they are asked who among them want to go home at the compound of Pusaka Benjina Resources fishing company in Benjina, Aru Islands, Indonesia.**

## SEAFOOD FROM SLAVES

*By ESTHER HTUSAN, MARGIE MASON,  
ROBIN McDOWELL and MARTHA MENDOZA  
The Associated Press*

# [ SEAFOOD FROM SLAVES ]



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**AP**



March 25, 2015

# AP Investigation: Are slaves catching the fish you buy?

By ROBIN McDOWELL, MARGIE MASON AND MARTHA MENDOZA  
Associated Press

BENJINA, Indonesia (AP)

**T**he Burmese slaves sat on the floor and stared through the rusty bars of their locked cage, hidden on a tiny tropical island thousands of miles from home.

Just a few yards away, other workers loaded cargo ships with slave-caught seafood that clouds the supply networks of major supermarkets, restaurants and even pet stores in the United States.

But the eight imprisoned men were considered flight risks — laborers who might dare run away. They lived on a few bites of rice and curry a day in a space barely big enough to lie down, stuck until the next trawler forces them back to sea.

“All I did was tell my captain I couldn’t take it anymore, that I wanted to go home,”

said Kyaw Naing, his dark eyes pleading into an Associated Press video camera sneaked in by a sympathetic worker. “The next time we docked,” he said nervously out of earshot of a nearby guard, “I was locked up.”

Here, in the Indonesian island village of Benjina and the surrounding waters, hundreds of trapped men represent one of the most desperate links criss-crossing between companies and countries in the seafood industry. This intricate web of connections separates the fish we eat from the men who catch it, and obscures a brutal truth: Your seafood may come from slaves.

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*EDITOR’S NOTE: The Associated Press notified the International Organization for Migration about men in this story,*



Dita Alangkara • AP

**Thai and Burmese fishing boat workers sit inside a cell at the compound of a fishing company in Benjina, Indonesia. The imprisoned men were considered slaves who might run away.**

*who were then moved out of Benjina by police for their safety. Hundreds of slaves remain on the island, and five other men were in the cage this week.*

The men the AP interviewed on Benjina were mostly from Myanmar, also known as Burma, one of the poorest countries in the world. They were brought to Indonesia through Thailand and forced to fish. Their catch was then shipped back to Thailand, where it entered the global stream of commerce.

Tainted fish can wind up in the supply chains of some of America's major grocery

stores, such as Kroger, Albertsons and Safeway; the nation's largest retailer, Wal-Mart; and the biggest food distributor, Sysco. It can find its way into the supply chains of some of the most popular brands of canned pet food, including Fancy Feast, Meow Mix and Iams. It can turn up as calamari at fine dining restaurants, as imitation crab in a California sushi roll or as packages of frozen snapper relabeled with store brands that land on our dinner tables.

In a year-long investigation, the AP talked to more than 40 current and former slaves in Benjina. The AP documented the journey of a single large shipment of

**AP** slave-caught seafood from the Indonesian village, tracking it by satellite to a gritty Thai harbor. Upon its arrival, AP journalists followed trucks that loaded and drove the seafood over four nights to dozens of factories, cold storage plants and the country's biggest fish market.

The tainted seafood mixes in with other fish at a number of sites in Thailand, including processing plants. U.S. Customs records show that several of those Thai factories ship to America. They also sell to Europe and Asia, but the AP traced

ensure their supplies are clean. They said the discovery of slaves underscores how hard it is to monitor what goes on halfway around the world.

Santa Monica Seafood, a large independent importer that sells to restaurants, markets and direct from its store, has been a leader in improving international fisheries, and sends buyers around the world to inspect vendors.

"The supply chain is quite cloudy, especially when it comes from offshore," said Logan Kock, vice president for

*They were kicked, whipped with toxic stingray tails or otherwise beaten if they complained or tried to rest.*

shipments to the U.S., where trade records are public.

By this time, it is nearly impossible to tell where a specific fish caught by a slave ends up. However, entire supply chains are muddied, and money is trickling down the line to companies that benefit from slave labor.

The major corporations contacted would not speak on the record but issued statements that strongly condemned labor abuses. All said they were taking steps to prevent forced labor, such as working with human rights groups to hold subcontractors accountable.

Several independent seafood distributors who did comment described the costly and exhaustive steps taken to

responsible sourcing, who acknowledged that the industry recognizes and is working to address the problem. "Is it possible a little of this stuff is leaking through? Yeah, it is possible. We are all aware of it."

The slaves interviewed by the AP had no idea where the fish they caught was headed. They knew only that it was so valuable, they were not allowed to eat it.

They said the captains on their fishing boats forced them to drink unclean water and work 20- to 22-hour shifts with no days off. Almost all said they were kicked, whipped with toxic stingray tails or otherwise beaten if they complained or tried to rest. They were paid little or nothing, as they hauled in heavy nets with squid, shrimp, snapper, grouper and other fish.

Some shouted for help over the deck of their trawler in the port to reporters, as bright fluorescent lights silhouetted their faces in the darkness.

“I want to go home. We all do,” one man called out in Burmese, a cry repeated by others. The AP is not using the names of some men for their safety. “Our parents haven’t heard from us for a long time. I’m sure they think we are dead.”

Another glanced fearfully over his shoulder toward the captain’s quarters, and then yelled: “It’s torture. When we get beaten, we can’t do anything back. ... I think our lives are in the hands of the Lord of Death.”

In the worst cases, numerous men reported maimings or even deaths on their boats.

“If Americans and Europeans are eating this fish, they should remember us,” said Hlaing Min, 30, a runaway slave from Benjina. “There must be a mountain of bones under the sea. ... The bones of the people could be an island, it’s that many.”

**F**or Burmese slaves, Benjina is the end of the world.

Roughly 3,500 people live in the town that straddles two small islands separated by a five-minute boat ride. Part of the Maluku chain, formerly known as the Spice Islands, the area is about 400 miles north of Australia, and hosts small kangaroos and rare birds of paradise with dazzling bright feathers.

Benjina is impossible to reach by boat



AP Photo • APTN

Image from video, Kyaw Naing, a slave from Myanmar, looks through the bars of a cell at the compound of a fishing company in Benjina, Indonesia.

for several months of the year, when monsoon rains churn the Arafura Sea. It is further cut off by a lack of Internet access. Before a cell tower was finally installed last month, villagers would climb nearby hills each evening in the hope of finding a signal strong enough to send a text. An old landing strip has not been used in years.

The small harbor is occupied by Pusaka Benjina Resources, whose five-story office compound stands out and includes the cage with the slaves. The company is the only fishing operation on Benjina officially registered in Indonesia, and is listed as the owner of more than 90 trawlers. However, the captains are Thai, and the Indonesian government is reviewing to see if the boats are really Thai-owned. Pusaka Benjina did not respond to phone calls and a letter, and did not speak to a reporter who waited for two hours in the company’s Jakarta office.

On the dock in Benjina, former slaves unload boats for food and pocket money.



Wong Maye-E • AP

Frozen seafood is off-loaded from a refrigerated cargo ship called the Silver Sea Line, at Thajeen Port in Samut Sakhon, Thailand.

Many are men who were abandoned by their captains — sometimes five, 10 or even 20 years ago — and remain stranded.

In the deeply forested island interiors, new runaways forage for food and collect rainwater, living in constant fear of being found by hired slave catchers.

And just off a beach covered in sharp coral, a graveyard swallowed by the jungle entombs dozens of fishermen. They are buried under fake Thai names given to them when they were tricked or sold onto their ships, forever covering up evidence of their captors' abuse, their friends say.

"I always thought if there was an entrance there had to be an exit," said Tun Lin Maung, a slave abandoned on

Benjina, as other men nodded or looked at the ground. "Now I know that's not true."

The Arafura Sea provides some of the world's richest and most diverse fishing grounds, teeming with mackerel, tuna, squid and many other species.

Although it is Indonesian territory, it draws many illegal fishing fleets, including from Thailand. The trade that results affects the United States and other countries.

The U.S. counts Thailand as one of its top seafood suppliers, and buys about 20 percent of the country's \$7 billion annual exports in the industry. Last year, the State Department blacklisted Thailand for failing to meet minimum standards

**AP** in fighting human trafficking, placing the country in the ranks of North Korea, Syria and Iran. However, there were no additional sanctions.

Thailand's seafood industry is largely run off the backs of migrant laborers, said Kendra Krieder, a State Department analyst who focuses on supply chains. The treatment of some of these workers falls under the U.S. government's definition of slavery, which includes forcing people to keep working even if they once signed up for the jobs, or trafficking them into situations where they are exploited.

"In the most extreme cases, you're talking about someone kidnapped or tricked into working on a boat, physically beaten, chained," said Krieder. "These situations would be called modern slavery

by any measure."

The Thai government says it is cleaning up the problem. On the bustling floor of North America's largest seafood show in Boston earlier this month, an official for the Department of Fisheries laid out a plan to address labor abuse, including new laws that mandate wages, sick leave and shifts of no more than 14 hours. However, Kamonpan Awaiwanont stopped short when presented details about the men in Benjina.

"This is still happening now?" he asked. He paused. "We are trying to solve it. This is ongoing."

The Thai government also promises a new national registry of illegal migrant workers, including more than 100,000 flooding the seafood industry. However,



Ellise Amendola • AP

**Thai Frozen Foods Association President Dr. Poj Aramwattananont at the Seafood Expo in Boston. He said Thai companies cannot always track down the origins of their fish .**



Dita Alangkara • AP

**Hla Phyo stands next to a grave marker of a Burmese fisherman slave who died on a fishing boat. Men are being buried under fake Thai names from their fraudulent travel documents.**

policing has now become even harder because decades of illegal fishing have depleted stocks close to home, pushing the boats farther and deeper into foreign waters.

The Indonesian government has called a temporary ban on most fishing, aiming to clear out foreign poachers who take billions of dollars of seafood from the country's waters. As a result, more than 50 boats are now docked in Benjina, leaving up to 1,000 more slaves stranded onshore and waiting to see what will happen next.

Indonesian officials are trying to enforce laws that ban cargo ships from picking up fish from boats at sea. This practice forces men to stay on the water

for months or sometimes years at a time, essentially creating floating prisons.

Susi Pudjiastuti, the new Fisheries Minister, said she has heard of different fishing companies putting men in cells. She added that she believes the trawlers on Benjina may really have Thai owners, despite the Indonesian paperwork, reflecting a common practice of faking or duplicating licenses.

She said she is deeply disturbed about the abuse on Benjina and other islands.

"I'm very sad. I lose my eating appetite. I lose my sleep," she said. "They are building up an empire on slavery, on stealing, on fish(ing) out, on massive environmental destruction for a plate of seafood."

**AP** **T**he story of slavery in the Thai seafood industry started decades ago with the same push-and-pull that shapes economic immigration worldwide — the hope of escaping grinding poverty to find a better life somewhere else.

In recent years, as the export business has expanded, it has become more difficult to convince young Burmese or Cambodian migrants and impoverished Thais — all of whom were found on Benjina — to accept the dangerous jobs. Agents have become

*Agents have become more desperate and ruthless, recruiting children and the disabled, lying about wages and even drugging and kidnapping migrants.*

more desperate and ruthless, recruiting children and the disabled, lying about wages and even drugging and kidnapping migrants, according to a former broker who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid retribution.

The broker said agents then sell the slaves, usually to Thai captains of fishing boats or the companies that own them. Each slave typically costs around \$1,000, according to Patima Tungpuchayakul, manager of the Thai-based nonprofit Labor Rights Promotion Network Foundation. The men are later told they have to work off the “debt” with wages that don’t come for months or years, or at all.

“The employers are probably more worried about the fish than the workers’ lives,” she said. “They get a lot of money

from this type of business.”

Illegal Thai boats are falsely registered to fish in Indonesia through graft, sometimes with the help of government authorities. Praporn Ekouru, a Thai former member of Parliament, admitted to the AP that he had bribed Indonesian officials to go into their waters, and complained that the Indonesian government’s crackdown is hurting business.

“In the past, we sent Thai boats to fish in Indonesian waters by changing their

flags,” said Praporn, who is also chairman of the Songkhla Fisheries Association in southern Thailand. “We had to pay bribes of millions of baht per year, or about 200,000 baht (\$6,100) per month. ... The officials are not receiving money anymore because this order came from the government.”

Illegal workers are given false documents, because Thai boats cannot hire undocumented crew. One of the slaves in Benjina, Maung Soe, said he was given a fake seafarer book belonging to a Thai national, accepted in Indonesia as an informal travel permit. He rushed back to his boat to dig up a crinkled copy.

“That’s not my name, not my signature,” he said angrily, pointing at the worn piece of paper. “The only thing on

**AP** here that is real is my photograph.”

Soe said he had agreed to work on a fishing boat only if it stayed in Thai waters, because he had heard Indonesia was a place from which workers never came back.

“They tricked me,” he said. “They lied to me. ... They created fake papers and put me on the boat, and now here I am in Indonesia.”

The slaves said the level of abuse on the fishing boats depends on individual captains and assistants. Aung Naing Win, who left a wife and two children behind in Myanmar two years ago, said some fishermen were so depressed that they simply threw themselves into the water. Win, 40, said his most painful task was working without proper clothing in the

ship’s giant freezer, where temperatures drop to 39 degrees below zero.

“It was so cold, our hands were burning,” he said. “No one really cared if anyone died.”

**T**he shipment the AP tracked from the port of Benjina carried fish from smaller trawlers; AP journalists talked to slaves on more than a dozen of them.

A crane hoisted the seafood onto a refrigerated cargo ship called the Silver Sea Line, with an immense hold as big as 50 semi-trucks. At this point, by United Nations and U.S. standards, every fish in that hold is considered associated with slavery.

The ship belongs to the Silver Sea Reefer Co., which is registered in Thailand



AP Photo • APTN

**Maung Soe of Myanmar holds up a copy of the seafarer’s book given to him before he boarded a Thai fishing trawler. “That’s not my name, not my signature,” he said. “The only thing on here that is real is my photograph.”**

**AP** and has at least nine refrigerated cargo boats. The company said it is not involved with the fishermen.

“We only carry the shipment and we are hired in general by clients,” said owner Panya Luangsomboon. “We’re separated from the fishing boats.”

The AP followed the Silver Sea Line by satellite over 15 days to Samut Sakhon. When it arrived, workers on the dock packed the seafood over four nights onto more than 150 trucks, which then delivered their loads around the city.

One truck bore the name and bird logo of Kingfisher Holdings Ltd., which supplies frozen and canned seafood around the

subsidiary KF Foods Ltd. sends about 100 metric tons of seafood from Thailand to America, according to U.S. Customs Bills of Lading. These shipments have gone to Santa Monica Seafood, Stavis Seafoods — located on Boston’s historic Fish Pier — and other distributors.

Richard Stavis, whose grandfather started the dealership in 1929, shook his head when told about the slaves whose catch may end up at businesses he buys from. He said his company visits processors and fisheries, requires notarized certification of legal practices and uses third-party audits.

“The truth is, these are the kind of

*The AP followed  
the Silver Sea Line by satellite  
over 15 days to Samut Sakhon.*

world. Another truck went to Mahachai Marine Foods Co., a cold storage business that also supplies to Kingfisher and other exporters, according to Kawin Ngeranek, whose family runs it.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” said Kawin, who also serves as spokesman for the Thai Overseas Fisheries Association. “Kingfisher buys several types of products.”

When asked about abusive labor practices, Kingfisher did not answer repeated requests for comment. Mahachai manager Narongdet Prasertsri responded, “I have no idea about it at all.”

Every month, Kingfisher and its

things that keep you up at night,” he said. “That’s the sort of thing I want to stop. ... There are companies like ours that care and are working as hard as they can.”

Wholesalers like Stavis sell packages of fish, branded and unbranded, that can end up on supermarket shelves with a private label or house brand. Stavis’ customers also include Sysco, the largest food distributor in the U.S.; there is no clear way to know which particular fish was sold to them.

Sysco declined an interview, but the company’s code of conduct says it “will not knowingly work with any supplier that uses



AP Photo • APTN

In this image from video, slaves from Myanmar lean over the deck of their fishing trawler at the port in Benjina, Indonesia. “I want to go home. We all do,” one man called out in Burmese, a cry repeated by others.

forced, bonded, indentured or slave labor.”

Gavin Gibbons, a spokesman for National Fisheries Institute, which represents about 75 percent of the U.S. seafood industry, said the reports of abuse were “disturbing” and “disheartening.” “But these type of things flourish in the shadows,” he said.

A similar pattern repeats itself with other shipments and other companies, as the supply chain splinters off in many directions in Samut Sakhon. It is in this Thai port that slave-caught seafood starts to lose its history.

The AP followed another truck to Niwat Co., which sells to Thai Union Manufacturing Co., according to part owner Prasert Luangsomboon. Weeks

later, when confronted about forced labor in their supply chain, Niwat referred several requests for comment to Luangsomboon, who could not be reached for further comment.

Thai Union Manufacturing is a subsidiary of Thai Union Frozen Products PCL., the country’s largest seafood corporation, with \$3.5 billion in annual sales. This parent company, known simply as Thai Union, owns Chicken of the Sea and is buying Bumble Bee, although the AP did not observe any tuna fisheries. In September, it became the country’s first business to be certified by Dow Jones for sustainable practices, after meeting environmental and social reviews.

Thai Union said it condemns human

**AP** rights violations, but multiple stakeholders must be part of the solution. “We all have to admit that it is difficult to ensure the Thai seafood industry’s supply chain is 100 percent clean,” CEO Thiraphong Chansiri said in an emailed statement.

Thai Union ships thousands of cans of cat food to the U.S., including household brands like Fancy Feast, Meow Mix and Iams. These end up on shelves of major grocery chains, such as Kroger, Safeway and Albertsons, as well as pet stores; again, however, it’s impossible to tell if a particular can of cat food might have slave-caught fish.

Thai Union says its direct clients include Wal-Mart, which declined an interview but said in an email statement: “We care about the men and women in our supply chain, and we are concerned about the ethical recruitment of workers.”

Wal-Mart described its work with several non-profits to end forced labor in Thailand, including Project Issara, and referred the AP to Lisa Rende Taylor, its director. She noted that slave-caught seafood can slip into supply chains undetected at several points, such as when it is traded between boats or mingles with clean fish at processing plants. She also confirmed that seafood sold at the Talay Thai market — to where the AP followed several trucks — can enter international supply chains.

“Transactions throughout Thai seafood supply chains are often not

well-documented, making it difficult to estimate exactly how much seafood available on supermarket shelves around the world is tainted by human trafficking and forced labor,” she said.

Poj Aramwattananont, president of an industry group that represents Thai Union, Kingfisher and others, said Thais are not “jungle people” and know that human trafficking is wrong. However, he acknowledged that Thai companies cannot always track down the origins of their fish.

“We don’t know where the fish come from when we buy from Indonesia,” said Poj of the Thai Frozen Foods Association. “We have no record. We don’t know if that fish is good or bad.”

**T**he seafood the slaves on Benjina catch may travel around the world, but their own lives often end right here, in this island village.

A crude cemetery holds more than 60 graves strangled by tall grasses and jungle vines, where small wooden markers are neatly labelled, some with the falsified names of slaves and boats. Only their friends remember where they were laid to rest.

In the past, former slave Hla Physo said, supervisors on ships simply tossed bodies into the sea to be devoured by sharks. But after authorities and companies started demanding that every man be accounted for on the roster upon return, captains began stowing corpses alongside the fish



Dita Alangkara • AP

**Workers load fish onto a cargo ship bound for Thailand. Seafood caught by slaves mixes in with other fish at a number of sites in Thailand.**

in ship freezers until they arrived back in Benjina, the slaves said.

Lifting his knees as he stepped over the thick brush, Phyo searched for two grave markers overrun by weeds — friends he helped bury.

It's been five years since he himself escaped the sea and struggled to survive on the island. Every night, his mind drifts back to his mother in Myanmar. He knows she must be getting old now, and he desperately wants to return to her. Standing among so many anonymous

tombs stacked on top of each other, hopelessness overwhelms him.

“I’m starting to feel like I will be in Indonesia forever,” he said, wiping a tear away. “I remember thinking when I was digging, the only thing that awaits us here is death.”

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*Esther Htusan contributed to this report from Benjina, Indonesia. Mason reported from Samut Sakhon, Thailand; Mendoza reported from Boston, Massachusetts.*

## SOURCING INFORMATION

A year-long investigation into forced labor and trafficking in Southeast Asia's fishing industry led an Associated Press team to Benjina, a small town that straddles two islands in the far reaches of western Indonesia. There journalists interviewed more than 40 current and former slaves, many of whom said they had been forced to work on boats overseen by Thai captains under extremely brutal conditions. They were paid little or nothing at all, and some were out to sea for months or years at a time.

The AP also found a locked cell with eight slaves inside, and handed a video camera to a dockworker, himself a former slave, to take close-up footage. Under the cover of darkness, the AP team used a small wooden boat to approach a trawler with slaves who yelled to them, pleading for help to go home.

Reporters were led to a jungle-covered graveyard that held the bodies of slaves, according to villagers and nonprofit officials. They interviewed three men who said they had escaped into the island's jungle interior, and also spent a night sleeping in the forest on an adjacent island with other runaway slaves from Benjina.

The AP watched slave-caught fish being loaded onto a refrigerated cargo ship bound for Thailand. They tracked the reefer's 15-day journey using satellite signals and met the vessel in Samut Sakhon, Thailand, where they saw the seafood unloaded into dozens of trucks over four nights. The journalists followed the rigs to processing factories, cold storage facilities and Thailand's largest wholesale fish market.

The AP then worked to establish a chain, using U.S. Customs documents showing Thai companies that export to the U.S. The food goes to Europe and Asia as well as the U.S., but the AP was able to gather most information on specific companies in America, where custom records are public.

To ensure the safety of the men quoted, photographed or videotaped in the story, the International Organization for Migration and Indonesian Marine Police were alerted about the men and then worked to move them away from Benjina. They are now waiting for their cases to be processed so they can return home to Myanmar, but hundreds of others remain stranded in Benjina and on surrounding islands.

# [ INTERACTIVE ]



## 2. 22-YEARS A SLAVE

June 29, 2015: One man's homecoming after he lost more than 2 decades.

<http://interactives.ap.org/2015/seafood-from-slaves/?START=freedom>

July 27, 2015

## AP Exclusive: AP tracks slave boats to Papua New Guinea

By ROBIN McDOWELL, MARTHA MENDOZA and MARGIE MASON  
Associated Press

YANGON, Myanmar (AP)

**F**rom space, the fishing boats are just little white specks floating in a vast stretch of blue water off Papua New Guinea. But zoom in and there's the critical evidence: Two trawlers loading slave-caught seafood onto a massive refrigerated cargo ship.

The trawlers fled a slave island in Indonesia with captives of a brutal Southeast Asian trafficking ring whose catch reaches the United States. Hundreds of men were freed after they were discovered there earlier this year, but 34 boats loaded with workers left for new fishing grounds before help arrived — they remain missing.

After a four-month investigation, The Associated Press has found that at

least some of them ended up in a narrow, dangerous strait nearly 1,000 miles away. The proof comes from accounts from recently returned slaves, satellite beacon tracking, government records, interviews with business insiders and fishing licenses. The location is also confirmed in images from space taken by one of the world's highest resolution satellite cameras, upon the AP's request.

The skippers have changed their ships' names and flags to evade authorities, but hiding is easy in the world's broad oceans. Traffickers operate with impunity across boundaries as fluid as the waters. Laws are few and hardly enforced. And depleted fish stocks have pushed boats farther out into seas that are seldom even glimpsed, let alone governed.



Gemunu Amarasinghe • AP

**Former Burmese slave fishermen Kaung Htet Wai, left, and Lin Lin, second left, point to a satellite image of a refrigerated cargo ship owned by Silver Sea Fishery Co., in waters off Papua New Guinea.**

This lack of regulation means that even with the men located, bringing them to safety may prove elusive.

Officials from Papua New Guinea working with the International Organization for Migration said they were not aware of human trafficking cases in the area but are investigating. Numerous other agencies — including Interpol, the United Nations and the U.S. State and Defense departments — told the AP they don't have the authority to get involved.

A handful of former slaves who recently made it home to Myanmar said hundreds of men remain unaccounted for.

“Papua New Guinea can be a lawless place,” said Lin Lin, one of the returnees,

describing fishing in the poor island nation. “Fishermen could die anytime, but the captains would not care. If they die, they will just be thrown away.”

He said he and his crewmembers still don't know why they were sent home last month, when their trawler returned to the same port in Thailand from which they were originally trafficked.

As the appetite for cheap fish worldwide grows, so does the demand for men who are paid little or nothing to catch it. Thailand's \$7 billion annual seafood export industry is built on the backs of poor people from its own country and migrants from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos who are sold, kidnapped and tricked

**AP** onto trawlers.

In November, the AP found hundreds of such forced laborers on the remote island village of Benjina in eastern Indonesia — some in a cage, others on boats and more than 60 buried in a graveyard. To date, the reporting has prompted the rescue and repatriation of more than 800 men, many of whom said they were abused or witnessed others being beaten, or in some

to bring the boats back for prosecution.

“They have to be responsible for what’s happened,” said Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti.

The disappearing act can start with a bucket of paint.

Kaung Htet Wai, 25, said his crewmates nailed a new name and number over the old one — Antasena 331 — and hoisted a different country’s flag: the red, black

*Captains repainted and renumbered other boats, and some kept flags from as many as four different countries in their hulls.*

cases even killed.

Reporters followed the slave-caught fish back to Thailand and linked it to the supply chains of major U.S. food sellers, such as Wal-Mart, Sysco and Kroger, and American pet food companies, including Fancy Feast, Meow Mix and Iams. The businesses have all said they strongly condemn labor abuse and vowed to take steps to prevent it.

In April, a week after the AP story was published, the Indonesian government launched a criminal inquiry. It was already clamping down on illegal fishing nationwide with a moratorium on all foreign boats. Officials rescued hundreds on the spot but they discovered that a third of the company’s 90 trawlers had already left — each with 15 to 20 migrants on board. The Indonesian government wants

and yellow of Papua New Guinea. Wai said his trawler did not dock for several months, and loaded many types of seafood, including mackerel, shrimp and shark, onto refrigerated cargo ships. Captains also repainted and renumbered other boats, and some kept flags from as many as four different countries in their hulls, according to former slaves and investigators.

The flag change protects rogue boats because typically the flagged states, not the host country, set their rules, said Mark Lagon, president of the Freedom House in Washington D.C. and former U.S. ambassador at large to combat human trafficking. Laws in general are weaker for fishing trawlers than other vessels, as is overall monitoring, he noted, creating a “black hole of governance.”

**AP**

As the boats hid, Indonesian investigators discovered that the company listed as their operator, Pusaka Benjina Resources, was really a venture between seafood industry tycoons and businessmen from Thailand and Indonesia.

Financial records going back seven years reveal Pusaka Benjina's lucrative business with a shipping company, Silver Sea Fishery Co. The trawlers crewed by slaves brought fish to Benjina, where it was loaded onto Silver Sea cargo ships heading for Thailand.

In a typical month, Silver Sea was invoiced about \$500,000 for loads of seafood. One month the firm was billed \$1.6 million, with a third of that charged

to the Silver Sea 2 — the same transport ship identified earlier this month in the satellite photo off Papua New Guinea.

Pusaka Benjina manager Hermanwir Martino, among seven people arrested on human trafficking charges, has said his company did nothing wrong. Silver Sea Fishery did not answer calls.

Photographs from the sky helped the AP actually catch the Silver Sea 2 in the act of doing business with the trawlers.

Over the past few months, satellite beacons show, Silver Sea cargo ships had been shuttling regularly between Thailand and Papua New Guinea. They slowed to a crawl or halted completely, apparently as they were being loaded with fish, in a



Brennan Linsley • AP

DigitalGlobe imagery analyst Micah Farfour, shows a high-resolution satellite photograph taken of trawlers in Papua New Guinea loading slave-caught seafood onto Silver Sea 2.

**AP** crooked strait known as the dogleg.

Analysts at SkyTruth, a West Virginia remote sensing and digital mapping firm, identified the Silver Sea 2 by its signals. However, they warned that getting photographic evidence of it collecting fish from one of the trawlers that fled Benjina would be next to impossible.

Nonetheless, two weeks ago, DigitalGlobe, a Colorado-based commercial vendor of space imagery, maneuvered a satellite at the request of the AP toward

Gisa Komangin, from Papua New Guinea's National Fisheries Authority, said that until now their focus has been on illegal fishing in the dogleg, and that a moratorium on all foreign fishing there is planned for the end of the month to crack down on poaching.

"When you are talking about illegal fishing," he said, "you are also talking about human smuggling."

The question now is if the men will be rescued. Many governments lack the

*The cargo reefer struck experts  
as suspicious because it had turned off its  
locator beacon for almost two days*

coordinates of the Silver Sea 2, which had dropped anchor off Papua New Guinea. The cargo reefer struck experts as suspicious because it had turned off its locator beacon for almost two days, possibly while picking up seafood.

The satellite whizzed over Papua New Guinea at 17,000 mph, 380 miles up. Within a day, DigitalGlobe analysts spotted a high-resolution shot of a ship matching the Silver Sea 2 right down to the docking ropes and open cargo holds, with boats identical to those from Benjina nestled alongside, apparently offloading fish.

CEO Jeff Tarr said this was the first time the technology had been used to capture human trafficking live: "You can't hide from space."

resources — or the will — to implement a patchwork of outdated maritime rules, some written more than a century ago. Kenneth Kennedy, a senior policy adviser for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, said international fishing agreements on sustainability, pollution and labor are needed, and those that do exist often go unenforced.

"If all these corporations, or ships, are ignoring these things put in place for the future of humanity, then what are we doing?" he asked. "We're just spinning our wheels."

Back in a dusty slum in Myanmar, relatives of the slaves still missing are desperate. One mother, Ohn Myint, went to the airport three times as men rescued from Benjina came home — hoping her

**AP** 19-year-old son, Myo Ko Ko, would come out of the terminal. But every time, she left alone, a little more drained of hope.

“I am missing my son so much, each and every hour,” she said. “I can only pray for him. I just think that only God can save him.”

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*McDowell reported from Yangon, Myanmar; Mendoza from Westminster, Colorado; and Mason from Tual, Indonesia. Esther Htusan contributed to this report from Yangon.*

Sept. 17, 2015

# More than 2,000 enslaved fishermen rescued in 6 months

By ESTHER HTUSAN and MARGIE MASON  
Associated Press

AMBON, Indonesia (AP)

**M**ore than 2,000 fishermen have been rescued this year from brutal conditions at sea, liberated as a result of an Associated Press investigation into seafood brought to the U.S. from a slave island in eastern Indonesia.

Dozens of Burmese men in the bustling port town of Ambon were the latest to go home, some more than a decade after being trafficked onto Thai trawlers. Grabbing one another's hands, the men walked together toward buses last week. As they pulled away for the airport, some of those still waiting their turn to go home cheered, throwing their arms in the air.

"I'm sure my parents think I'm dead," said Tin Lin Tun, 25, who lost contact

with his family after a broker lured him to Thailand five years ago. Instead of working in construction, as promised, he was sold onto a fishing boat and taken to Indonesia. "I'm their only son. They're going to cry so hard when they see me."

The reunion he envisions has played out hundreds of times since March, after the AP tracked fish — caught by men who were savagely beaten and caged — to the supply chains of some of America's biggest food sellers, such as Wal-Mart, Sysco and Kroger, and popular brands of canned pet food like Fancy Feast, Meow Mix and Iams. It can turn up as calamari at fine restaurants, as imitation crab in a sushi roll or as packages of frozen snapper relabeled with store brands that land on our dinner tables. The U.S. companies

**AP** have all said they strongly condemn labor abuse and are taking steps to prevent it.

In response, a multimillion-dollar Thai-Indonesian fishing business has been shut down, at least nine people have been arrested and two fishing cargo vessels have been seized. In the U.S., importers have demanded change, three class-action lawsuits are underway, new laws have been introduced and the Obama administration is pushing exporters to clean up their labor practices. The AP's

avoiding human trafficking allegations.

“We’ve never seen a rescue on this scale before,” said Lisa Rende Taylor, an anti-trafficking expert formerly with the United Nations who now heads the anti-slavery nonprofit Project Issara. “They deserve compensation and justice.”

Many experts believe the most effective pressure for change can come from consumers, whose hunger for cheap seafood is helping fuel the massive labor abuses. Southeast Asia’s fishing industry

*The largest impact, by far, has been the rescue of some of the most desperate and isolated people in the world.*

work was entered into the congressional record for a hearing, and is scheduled to be brought up for discussion again later this month.

The largest impact, by far, has been the rescue of some of the most desperate and isolated people in the world. More than 2,000 men from Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos have been identified or repatriated since the AP’s initial story ran, according to the International Organization for Migration and foreign ministries. The tally includes eight fishermen trafficked aboard a Thai cargo ship seized in neighboring Papua New Guinea.

And those returnee figures don’t tell the whole story: Hundreds more have been quietly sent home by their companies,

is dominated by Thailand, which earns \$7 billion annually in exports. The business relies on tens of thousands of poor migrant laborers, mainly from neighboring Southeast Asian countries. They often are tricked, sold or kidnapped and put onto boats that are commonly sent to distant foreign waters to poach fish.

A year-long investigation led the AP to the island village of Benjina, part of Indonesia’s Maluku chain about 400 miles north of Australia. There, workers considered runaway risks were padlocked behind the rusty bars of a cage.

Men in Benjina — both those stuck on Thai fishing boats and others who had escaped into the jungle — were the first to go home when rescues led by the Indonesian government began in early



Robin McDowell • AP

**A Myanmar official cross-checks names at a transit center in Yangon, Myanmar. More than 2,000 fishermen have been rescued this year.**

April. Since then, hundreds more have been identified and repatriated from neighboring islands. Many of those leaving recently from Ambon were handed cash payments by company officials, but they said the money was a fraction of what they were owed.

An AP survey of almost 400 men underscores the horrific conditions fishing slaves faced. Many described being whipped with stingray tails, deprived of food and water and forced to work for years without pay. More than 20 percent said they were beaten, 30 percent said they saw someone else beaten and 12 percent said they saw a person die.

“My colleague, Chit Oo, fell from the

boat into the water,” wrote Ye Aung, 32, of Myanmar. “The captain said there was no need to search, he will float by himself later.”

Another man, 18-year-old Than Min Oo, said he was not paid and wrote simply: “Please help me.”

For many, the return home is bittersweet. Parents collapse in tears upon seeing their sons, and some men meet siblings born after they left. But almost all come back empty-handed, struggle to find jobs and feel they are yet another burden to their extremely poor families. At least one crowd-sourcing site, set up by Anti-Slavery International, is aimed at helping them.

A study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine earlier this year, based on interviews with over 1,000 trafficking survivors from different industries, found half of those returning from slavery at sea suffered from depression and around 40 percent from post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety. Those men were not connected to the Benjina cases.

Many bear physical scars as well.

Tun Lin, who returned to Myanmar

they'd say they didn't have it ... but then they'd go to nightclubs, brothels and bars, drinking expensive alcohol."

Like many of the men rescued from Ambon, Tun Lin had been working for PT Mabiru Industries, where operations were halted several months ago as authorities investigated trafficking and illegal fishing in the industry there. Mabiru, one of more than a dozen fishing, processing and cold storage firms in Ambon, sold packages of yellowfin tuna largely headed for Japanese

*"Boat leaders" were assigned to act as enforcers, beating up fishermen who weren't working fast enough.*

last week, held up his right hand: a stump with just a thumb.

He said one finger was ripped off while he tried to wrangle an unwieldy net on the deck of his boat, and the other three were crushed beyond saving. He was taken by refrigerated cargo delivery ship to Thailand, where the remaining digits were surgically removed. Four days later, he said, he was put back on a ship bound for Indonesia, where he fished for the next three years.

"There were some good captains, but there were a lot of bad ones," the 33-year-old said, his eyes filling with tears as he described how "boat leaders" were assigned to act as enforcers, beating up fishermen who weren't working fast enough. "When we asked for our money,

markets, and also shipped to the United States. The company is shuttered and its managers could not be reached.

Florida-based South Pacific Specialties, which distributes to supermarket chains, restaurants and food groups, received a shipping container loaded with frozen tuna from Mabiru in February. Managing partner Francisco Pinto told the AP his company had once rented out Mabiru's facilities in Ambon, bought tuna from private artisanal fishermen, and hired its own workers for filleting and processing fish. Pinto said he has spent the past six weeks in Indonesia meeting and observing fish suppliers because American customers are increasingly demanding fair treatment for workers.

Amid the increased scrutiny, some have

**AP** taken legal action. In the past month, three separate class-action lawsuits have been filed naming Mars Inc., IAMS Co., Proctor & Gamble, Nestle USA Inc., Nestle Purina Petcare Co. and Costco, accusing them of having seafood supply chains tainted with slave labor. Ashley Klann, a spokeswoman for the Seattle-based law firm behind several of the cases, said the litigation “came as a result of AP’s reporting.”

Even with the increased global attention, hundreds of thousands of men still are forced to work in the seafood industry.

“Slavery in Southeast Asia’s fishing

industry is a real-life horror story,” said Congressman Chris Smith, R-N.J., who is among those sponsoring new legislation. “It’s no longer acceptable for companies to deny responsibility ... not when people are kept in cages, not when people are made to work like animals for decades to pad some company’s bottom line.”

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*AP writer Robin McDowell contributed to this report from Yangon, Myanmar, and AP National Writer Martha Mendoza contributed from Washington, D.C., and California. Mason reported from Jakarta, Indonesia.*



Robin McDowell • AP

**Former slave-fisherman Tun Lin said one finger was ripped off while trying to wrangle an unwieldy net on the deck of his boat in eastern Indonesia and the other three were crushed beyond saving.**

December 14, 2015

# AP: Global supermarkets selling shrimp peeled by slaves

By MARGIE MASON, ROBIN McDOWELL, MARTHA MENDOZA  
and ESTHER HTUSAN  
Associated Press

SAMUT SAKHON, Thailand (AP)

**E**very morning at 2 a.m., they heard a kick on the door and a threat: Get up or get beaten. For the next 16 hours, No. 31 and his wife stood in the factory that owned them with their aching hands in ice water. They ripped the guts, heads, tails and shells off shrimp bound for overseas markets, including grocery stores and all-you-can-eat buffets across the United States.

After being sold to the Gig Peeling Factory, they were at the mercy of their Thai bosses, trapped with nearly 100 other Burmese migrants. Children worked alongside them, including a girl so tiny she had to stand on a stool to reach the peeling table. Some had been there for months, even years, getting little or no

pay. Always, someone was watching.

No names were ever used, only numbers given by their boss — Tin Nyo Win was No. 31.

Pervasive human trafficking has helped turn Thailand into one of the world's biggest shrimp providers. Despite repeated promises by businesses and government to clean up the country's \$7 billion seafood export industry, an Associated Press investigation has found shrimp peeled by modern-day slaves is reaching the U.S., Europe and Asia.

The problem is fueled by corruption and complicity among police and authorities. Arrests and prosecutions are rare. Raids can end up sending migrants without proper paperwork to jail, while owners go unpunished.



Dita Alangkara • AP

**Children and teenagers sit together to be registered by officials during a raid on a shrimp shed in Samut Sakhon, Thailand. Abuse is common in Samut Sakhon, which attracts workers from some of the world's poorest countries.**

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*Editor's Note: More than 2,000 trapped fishermen have been freed this year as a result of an ongoing Associated Press investigative series into slavery in the Thai seafood industry. The reports also have led to a dozen arrests, millions of dollars' worth of seizures and proposals for new federal laws.*

Hundreds of shrimp peeling sheds are hidden in plain sight on residential streets or behind walls with no signs in Samut

Sakhon, a port town an hour outside Bangkok. The AP found one factory that was enslaving dozens of workers, and runaway migrants led rights groups to the Gig shed and a third facility. All three sheds held 50 to 100 people each, many locked inside.

As Tin Nyo Win soon found out for himself, there's no easy escape. One woman had been working at Gig for eight years. Another man ended up peeling shrimp there after breaking free from an equally brutal factory.

“I was shocked after working there a while, and I realized there was no way out,” said Tin Nyo Win, 22, who has a baby face and teeth stained red from chewing betel nut.

“I told my wife, ‘We’re in real trouble. If something ends up going wrong, we’re going to die.’”

Last month, AP journalists followed and filmed trucks loaded with freshly peeled shrimp from the Gig shed to major

50 states and found shrimp products from supply chains tainted with forced labor.

European and Asian import and export records are confidential, but the Thai companies receiving shrimp tracked by the AP all say they ship to Europe and Asia as well.

The businesses that responded condemned the practices that lead to these conditions. Many said they were launching investigations when told their

*Entire families labored side-by-side  
at rows of stainless steel counters piled high  
with tubs of shrimp.*

Thai exporting companies and then, using U.S. customs records and Thai industry reports, tracked it globally. They also traced similar connections from another factory raided six months earlier, and interviewed more than two dozen workers from both sites.

U.S. customs records show the shrimp made its way into the supply chains of major U.S. food stores and retailers such as Wal-Mart, Kroger, Whole Foods, Dollar General and Petco, along with restaurants such as Red Lobster and Olive Garden.

It also entered the supply chains of some of America’s best-known seafood brands and pet foods, including Chicken of the Sea and Fancy Feast, which are sold in grocery stores from Safeway and Schnucks to Piggly Wiggly and Albertsons. AP reporters went to supermarkets in all

supply chains were linked to people held against their will in sheds like the Gig factory, which sat behind a gate off a busy street, between railroad tracks and a river.

Inside the large warehouse, toilets overflowed with feces, and the putrid smell of raw sewage wafted from an open gutter just outside the work area. Young children ran barefoot through suffocating dorm rooms. Entire families labored side-by-side at rows of stainless steel counters piled high with tubs of shrimp.

Tin Nyo Win and his wife, Mi San, were cursed for not peeling fast enough and called “cows” and “buffalos.” They were allowed to go outside for food only if one of them stayed behind as insurance against running away.

But escaping was all they could think about.

**AP** **S**hrimp is the most-loved seafood in the U.S., with Americans downing 1.3 billion pounds every year, or about 4 pounds per person. Once a luxury reserved for special occasions, it became cheap enough for stir-fries and scampis when Asian farmers started growing it in ponds three decades ago. Thailand quickly dominated the market and now sends nearly half of its supply to the U.S.

The Southeast Asian country is one of the worst human trafficking hubs on earth. It has been blacklisted for the past two years by the U.S. State Department, which cited complicity by Thai officials. The European Union issued a warning earlier this year that tripled seafood import tariffs, and is expected to decide next month whether to impose an outright ban.

Consumers enjoy the convenience of dumping shrimp straight from freezer to skillet, the result of labor-intensive peeling and cleaning. Unable to keep up with demand, exporters get their supply from peeling sheds that are sometimes nothing more than crude garages adjacent to the boss's house. Supply chains are so complicated that, on any given day, buyers may not know exactly where the shrimp comes from.

The Thai Frozen Foods Association lists about 50 registered shrimp sheds in the country. However, hundreds more operate in Samut Sakhon, the country's main shrimp processing region. Here the humid air hangs thick with the smell of

dead fish. Refrigerated trucks with seafood logos barrel down streets straddled by huge processing plants. Just as ubiquitous are the small pickups loaded with migrant workers from neighboring Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar being taken to gut, fillet, de-vein and peel the seafood that fuels this town's economy.

Abuse is common in Samut Sakhon. An International Labor Organization report estimated 10,000 migrant children aged 13 to 15 work in the city. Another U.N. agency study found nearly 60 percent of Burmese laborers toiling in its seafood



Ross D. Franklin • AP

**Shrimp products from Thailand packaged under the name "Waterfront Bistro" at a Safeway grocery store in Phoenix.**

**AP** processing industry were victims of forced labor.

Tin Nyo Win and his wife were taken to the Gig Peeling Factory in July when they made the long drive from Myanmar across the border, crammed so tightly into a truck with other workers that they could barely breathe. Like many migrants, they were lured from home by a broker with promises of good-paying jobs, and came without visas or work permits.

After being sold to the Gig shed, the

their wages without explanation. After they bought gloves and rubber boots, and paid monthly “cleaning fees” inside the trash-strewn shed, almost nothing was left.

Employees said they had to work even when they were ill. Seventeen children peeled alongside adults, sometimes crying, at stations where paint chipped off the walls and slick floors were eaten away by briny water.

Lunch breaks were only 15 minutes, and migrants were yelled at for talking too

*They were lured from home by a broker with promises of good-paying jobs, and came without visas or work permits.*

couple learned they would have to work off what was considered their combined worth — \$830. It was an insurmountable debt.

Because they were illegal workers, the owners constantly threatened to call police to keep them in line. Even documented migrants were vulnerable because the boss held onto identification papers so they could not leave.

Under the U.S. government’s definition, forced labor and debt bondage are considered slavery.

In the Gig shed, employees’ salaries were pegged to how fast their fingers could move. Tin Nyo Win and his wife peeled about 175 pounds of shrimp for just \$4 a day, less than half of what they were promised. A female Thai manager, who slapped and cursed workers, often cut

much. Several workers said a woman died recently because she didn’t get proper medical care for her asthma. Children never went to school and began peeling shrimp just an hour later than adults.

“We had to get up at 3 in the morning and then start working continuously,” said Eae Hpaw, 16, whose arms were a patchwork of scars from infections and allergies caused by the shrimp. “We stopped working around 7 in the evening. We would take a shower and sleep. Then we would start again.”

After being roughed up one night by a supervisor, five months into their captivity, Tin Nyo Win and his wife decided they couldn’t take the threats anymore.

“They would say, ‘There’s a gun in the boss’s car and we’re going to come and



Gemunu Amarasinghe • AP

**Workers carry boxes filled with iced shrimp at a seafood market. Thailand sends nearly half of its shrimp to the U.S.**

shoot you, and no one will know,” he said.

The next morning, the couple saw an opportunity when the door wasn't being watched.

They ran.

Less than 24 hours later, Tin Nyo Win's wife was captured at a market by the shed manager. He watched helplessly as she was dragged away by her hair, terrified for her — and the baby they recently learned she was carrying.

**T**racking shipments from just the Gig Peeling Factory highlights how fast and far slave-peeled shrimp can travel.

The AP followed trucks from the shed

over five days to major Thai exporters. One load pulled into N&N Foods, owned by one of the world's largest seafood companies, Tokyo-based Maruha Nichiro Foods. A second drove to Okeanos Food, a subsidiary of another leading global seafood supplier, Thai Union. Still more went to Kongphop Frozen Foods and The Siam Union Frozen Foods, which have customers in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia. All the exporters and parent companies that responded said they abhor human rights abuses.

Shrimp can mix with different batches of seafood as it is packaged, branded and shipped. At that point, there's no way to

tell where any individual piece was peeled. Once it reaches American restaurants, hospitals, universities and military chow halls, all the shrimp from those four Thai processors is considered associated with slavery, according to United Nations and U.S. standards.

U.S. customs records linked the exported shrimp to more than 40 U.S. brands, including popular names such as Sea Best, Waterfront Bistro and Aqua Star. The AP found shrimp products with the same labels in more than 150 stores across America — from Honolulu to New York City to a tiny West Virginia town of 179 people. The grocery store chains have tens of thousands of U.S. outlets where millions of Americans shop.

In addition, the Thai distributors state on their websites that they export to Europe and Asia, although specific records are confidential. AP reporters in Germany, Italy, England and Ireland researched shrimp in supermarkets and found several brands sourced from Thailand. Those stores said the names of their Thai distributors are proprietary. Royal Greenland — an importer whose shrimp was seen under store brands as a product from Thailand but has not been linked to the sheds — said it now has shifted its sourcing to Ecuador.

By all accounts, the work at the Gig shed was off the books — and thus even businesses carefully tracking the provenance of the shrimp called the AP's findings a surprise.

“I want to eliminate this,” said Dirk Leuenberger, CEO of Aqua Star. “I think it’s disgusting that it’s even remotely part of my business.”

Some, including Red Lobster, Whole Foods and H-E-B Supermarkets, said they were confident — based on assurances from their Thai supplier — that their particular shrimp was not associated with abusive factories. That Thai supplier admits it hadn’t known where it was getting all its shrimp and sent a note outlining corrective measures to U.S. businesses demanding answers last week.

“I am deeply disappointed that despite our best efforts we have discovered this potential instance of illegal labor practice in our supply chain,” Thai Union CEO Thiraphong Chansiri wrote. His statement acknowledged “that illicitly sourced product may have fraudulently entered its supply chain” and confirmed a supplier “was doing business with an unregistered pre-processor in violation of our code of conduct.”

After AP brought its findings to dozens of global retailers, Thai Union announced it will bring all shrimp-processing in-house by the end of the year and provide jobs to workers whose factories close as a result. It’s a significant step from the industry leader whose international brands include John West in Britain, Petit Navire in France and Mareblu in Italy; shrimp from abusive factories in Thailand has not been associated with them.

Susan Coppedge, the U.S. State



Gemunu Amarasinghe • AP

Female workers sort shrimp at a seafood market in Mahachai, Thailand.

Department's new anti-trafficking ambassador, said problems persist because brokers, boat captains and seafood firms aren't held accountable and victims have no recourse.

"We have told Thailand to improve their anti-trafficking efforts, to increase their prosecutions, to provide services to victims," she said. She added that American consumers "can speak through their wallets and tell companies: 'We don't want to buy things made with slavery.'"

The State Department has not slapped Thailand with sanctions applied to other countries with similarly weak human trafficking records because it is a strategically critical Southeast Asian ally. And federal authorities say they can't

enforce U.S. laws that ban importing goods produced by forced labor, citing an exception for items consumers can't get from another source. Thai shrimp slips right through that loophole.

Thailand is not the only source of slave-tainted seafood in the U.S., where nearly 90 percent of shrimp is imported.

The State Department's annual anti-trafficking reports have tied such seafood to 55 countries on six continents, including major suppliers to the U.S. Earlier this year, the AP uncovered a slave island in Benjina, Indonesia, where hundreds of migrant fishermen were trafficked from Thailand and sometimes locked in a cage. Last month, food giant Nestle disclosed that its own Thai suppliers were abusing

**AP** and enslaving workers and has vowed to force change.

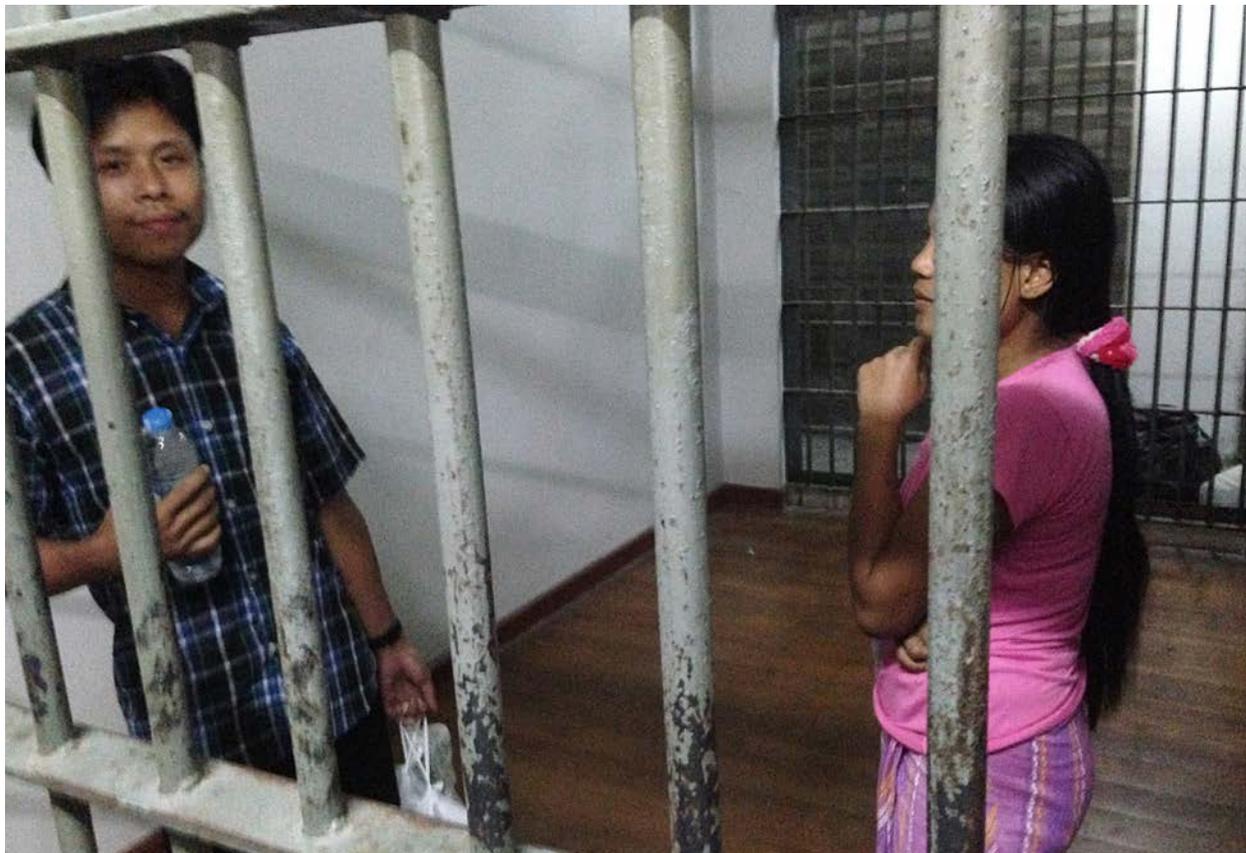
Human trafficking in Thailand also stretches far beyond the seafood industry. Earlier this year, high-ranking officials were implicated in a smuggling syndicate involving tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar. A crackdown came after dozens of victims died in Thai jungle camps because they were unable to pay ransoms.

The junta military government has singled out the country's fisheries sector for reforms. It says it has passed new laws to crack down on illegal activities aboard fishing boats and inside seafood-

processing factories and is working to register undocumented migrant workers.

"There have been some flaws in the laws, and we have been closing those gaps," said M.L. Puntarik Smiti, the Thai Labor Ministry's permanent secretary. "The government has made human trafficking a national agenda. The policy is clear, and every department is working in the same direction. ... In the past, most punishments focused on the laborers, but now more focus is put on punishing the employers."

Police point to a new law that goes after officers involved in human trafficking, and say rooting out corruption and complicity



Robin McDowell • AP

**Burmese shrimp shed worker Tin Nyo Win, left, and his wife, Mi San, stand in a jail cell after they were arrested in Samut Sakhon, Thailand.**

**AP** is a priority.

Critics argue, however, the changes have been largely cosmetic. Former slaves repeatedly described how police took them into custody and then sold them to agents who trafficked them again into the seafood industry.

“There are laws and regulations, but they are being selectively enforced to benefit one side,” said Patima Tungpuchayakul, manager of the Thai-based nonprofit Labor Rights Promotion Network Foundation. “When you find there is a child working 16 hours a day and

Former employees told the AP they had been locked inside and forced to work long hours with no days off and little sleep.

The conditions they described inside were horrific: A woman eight months pregnant miscarried on the shed floor and was forced to keep peeling for four days while hemorrhaging. An unconscious toddler was refused medical care after falling about 12 feet onto a concrete floor. Another pregnant woman escaped only to be tracked down, yanked into a car by her hair and handcuffed to a fellow worker at the factory.

*“When you find there is a child working 16 hours a day and getting paid (\$2.75) ... the government has to put a stop to this.”*

getting paid (\$2.75) ... the government has to put a stop to this.”

The peeling sheds that supply to major Thai seafood companies are supposed to be certified and inspected, but the stamp of approval does not always prevent abuses.

A factory just a few miles away from Tin Nyo Win’s shed provided shrimp to companies including Thai Union; a half-dozen former workers said a Thai Union employee visited the shed every day. A runaway worker alerted a local migrant labor group about slave-like conditions there after being brutally beaten across his ear and throat with iron chains. Police raided the factory in May.

“Sometimes when we were working, the tears would run down our cheeks because it was so tiring we couldn’t bear it,” said the worker who ran away. His name is being withheld due to concerns about his safety.

“We were crying, but we kept peeling shrimp,” he said. “We couldn’t rest. ... I think people are guilty if they eat the shrimp that we peeled like slaves.”

Shrimp from that factory entered the supply chains of Thai Union, which, in the six months prior to the bust, shipped 15 million pounds of frozen shrimp to dozens of U.S. companies, customs records show. Those included Red Lobster and Darden Restaurants, which owns outlets such as

**AP** Olive Garden, LongHorn Steakhouse and several other popular American chains.

The runaway worker was a free man after the May raid. But five months later, running low on cash with a pregnant wife, he felt desperate enough to look for a job in another shrimp factory. He hoped conditions would be better this time.

They weren't. His wages were withheld, and he ended up in the Gig factory peeling shrimp next to Tin Nyo Win — No. 31.

**M**odern-day slavery is often just part of doing business in Thailand's seafood export capital. Some shed owners believe they are providing jobs to poor migrant workers in need. Police are paid to look the other way and say officers frequently do not understand that

practices such as forced labor and debt bondage are against the law.

"We just need to educate everyone on this issue," said Jaruwat Vaisaya, deputy commissioner of Bangkok's Metropolitan Police. "I don't think they know what they're doing is called human trafficking, but they must know it's wrong."

News surfaces about an abusive shed only when workers become so hopeless they're willing to risk everything to escape. Once on the street, without documentation, they are in some ways even more vulnerable. They face possible arrest and deportation or being resold.

After fleeing the Gig shed, Tin Nyo Win was alone. He didn't even know where the shed manager had taken his wife. He sought help from a local labor



Dita Alangkara • AP

**Workers react during a raid on a shrimp shed conducted by Thailand's Department of Special Investigation in Samut Sakhon, Thailand.**

**AP** rights group, which prompted police to take action.

At dawn on Nov. 9, nearly two weeks after running away, he returned to the shed wearing dark glasses, a hat and a mask to keep the owners from recognizing him. He burst through the gate with dozens of officers and military troops, and frantically searched for his wife in the dim quarters on both floors of the maze-like complex.

Frightened Burmese workers huddled

in front of the cameras. But the story does not end there.

No one at the Gig shed was arrested for human trafficking, a law that's seldom enforced. Instead, migrants with papers, including seven children, were sent back there to work. Another 10 undocumented children were taken from their parents and put into a shelter, forced to choose between staying there for years or being deported back to Myanmar alone. Nineteen other

*No one at the Gig shed was arrested for human trafficking, a law that's seldom enforced.*

on the dirty concrete floor, the men and women separated. Some could be heard whispering: "That's 31. He came back." One young mother breast-fed a 5-month-old baby, while 17 children were taken to a corner.

Tin Nyo Win's wife was nowhere.

With law enforcement leading the way, it didn't take long to find her, though: Mi San was at a nearby fish factory. After being caught by the shed manager, she was taken to police. But instead of treating her as a trafficking victim, she said they put her back to work. Even as police and her husband escorted her out of the second factory, the Thai owner followed them into the street, complaining that Mi San still owed \$22 for the pork and chicken she ate.

For Thai police, it looked like a victory

illegal workers were detained.

Tin Nyo Win and his wife soon found out that not even whistleblowers are protected. Just four days after being reunited, the couple was fingerprinted and locked inside a Thai jail cell without even a mattress. They were held on nearly \$4,000 bail and charged with entering the country illegally and working without permits.

Back at the shed where their nightmare began, a worker reached by phone pleaded for help as trucks loaded with slave-peeled shrimp continued to roll out.

Epilogue:

The Gig Peeling Factory is now closed, with workers moved to another shed linked to the same owners, said Chaiyuth Thomya, the superintendent of Samut Sakhon's

**AP** main police station. A Gig owner reached by phone by the AP declined to comment.

Jaruwat, the Bangkok police official, was alerted to how the case was being handled and has ordered local authorities to re-investigate it for human trafficking, and arrests have since been made. Tin Nyo Win and his pregnant wife were released from jail 10 days after they were locked up and are now being housed in a government shelter for victims of human trafficking.

Chaiyuth called a meeting to explain human trafficking laws to nearly 60 shed

owners, some of whom were confused about raids that swept up illegal migrants. Later, Chaiyuth quoted one shed owner as saying, “I’m not selling drugs, why did they take possession of my things?”

Meanwhile, the AP informed labor rights investigators who work closely with police about another shed where workers said they were being held against their will. It is being examined.

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*Associated Press video journalist  
Tassanee Vejpongsa in Samut Sakhon,  
Thailand, contributed to this report.*



Gemunu Amarasinghe • AP

**Female workers sort shrimp at a seafood market in Mahachai, Thailand.**

## [ ABOUT THE WRITERS ]



**MARTHA MENDOZA** is a Pulitzer prize-winning Associated Press National Writer whose investigative reports have prompted White House responses, Congressional hearings, consumer safety warnings and changes in federal regulations. She has been an AP reporter in New York, New Mexico, California and Mexico City. Mendoza was a 2001 Knight Fellow at Stanford University and a 2007 Ferris Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. She teaches in the graduate University of California, Santa Cruz Science Communications Program and is a senior fellow at the Institute for Justice and Journalism.



**MARGIE MASON** has reported for The Associated Press from more than 20 countries on four continents. She has been based in Asia for the past 12 years, working as a regional medical writer for a decade. She has won several awards for her work, and has covered many of Asia's biggest news stories along with producing groundbreaking enterprise that often focuses on the poor. She was a 2009 Nieman Global Health fellow at Harvard University and an Asian studies fellow at the University of Hawaii in 2000. In addition to postings in Vietnam and her current base in Indonesia, Mason also worked for the AP in San Francisco and Charleston, WV, along with earlier stints at daily newspapers. She has a degree in journalism from West Virginia University.



**ROBIN McDOWELL** is a correspondent in The Associated Press's newly opened bureau in Myanmar. She joined the news cooperative in 1996 as chief correspondent for Cambodia, covering everything from tank battles in the streets of the capital to the death of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot. After several years in the U.S., working first in the Denver bureau and then on the international editing desk in New York, she helped set up the Asia Pacific editing desk in 2001. She was promoted to bureau chief of Indonesia in 2005, covering deadly plane crashes, tsunamis and terrorist attacks on nightclubs and hotels through 2012.



**ESTHER HTUSAN** is an ethnic Kachin, one of the minority groups in Myanmar. She studied at the regional school and graduated from the Kachin State University. After experiencing civil war in her ethnic region, Htusan later came down to Yangon, the southern part of the country and studied English and Political Science in the city. Since joining The Associated Press two years ago, Htusan has relentlessly pursued stories about human rights abuses in Myanmar following a half-century of dictatorship.