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1-More than 2,000 enslaved fishermen rescued in 6 months

By ESTHER HTUSAN and MARGIE MASON

Sep. 17, 2015 12:44 PM EDT

AMBON, Indonesia (AP) — More 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 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 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, 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 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 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 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, 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 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 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."

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.

2-Indonesia nabs ship believed to carry slave-caught fish

By MARGIE MASON

August 14, 2015 12:33 AM

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ff755b168ad443ffabd80d5d3818dfc5/indonesia-navy-nabs-cargo-ship-loaded-slave-caught-fish>

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A massive refrigerated cargo ship believed to be loaded with slave-caught fish was seized by Indonesia's navy and brought to shore Thursday, after The Associated Press informed authorities it had entered the country's waters.

The Thai-owned Silver Sea 2 was located late Wednesday and escorted about 80 miles (130 kilometers) to a naval base in Sabang on the Indonesian archipelago's northwestern tip, said Col. Sujatmiko, the local naval chief.

The AP used a satellite beacon signal to trace its path from Papua New Guinea waters, where it was also being sought, into neighboring Indonesia. The navy then spent a week trying to catch it. The ship was close to leaving Indonesian waters by the time it was finally seized.

"I'm so overwhelmed with happiness," said Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti, adding it was difficult to find because the boat's signal had a delay. "It was almost impossible, but we did it."

The Silver Sea 2 is the same 2,285-ton vessel captured in a high-resolution satellite photo last month in Papua New Guinea showing its hold open and two fishing trawlers tethered to each side, loading fish. Analysts identified the smaller trawlers as among those that fled the remote Indonesian island village of Benjina earlier this year, crewed by enslaved men from poor Southeast Asian countries who are routinely beaten and forced to work nearly nonstop with little or no pay.

An AP investigation revealed their catch reached 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.

[View gallery](#)



Thai-owned cargo ship Silver Sea 2 is anchored off an Indonesian Navy base in Sabang, Aceh province, ...

Indonesia freed hundreds of men earlier this year after the AP exposed they were trapped — including some locked in a cage — on Benjina. But 34 boats loaded with slaves escaped before authorities arrived. They remain missing. Seven arrests have been made in Indonesia and two in Thailand related to the case.

Panya Luangsomboon, owner of Silver Sea Reefer Co., which owns several refrigerated cargo ships in Thailand, said Friday that the company has done nothing illegal and has asked Thai officials for help in getting the Silver Sea 2 back.

"We have received numerous calls from Thai agencies ... asking about this and basically we said we have never done anything like it," company manager Venus Pornpasert said Thursday of allegations of human trafficking and illegal fishing. Venus added that all of the ships' crews are Thai nationals and certified by the International Maritime Organization.

However, enslaved workers who recently returned home from Papua New Guinea to Myanmar said they had regularly loaded fish onto Silver Sea cargo ships, which ferried the catch back to Thailand. Burmese slaves rescued from Benjina, among hundreds interviewed by the AP in person or in writing, also said they had been trafficked in Thailand and brought to fish in Indonesia aboard the Silver Sea 2. And late last year, AP journalists saw slave-caught fish in Benjina being loaded onto another reefer owned by Silver Sea.

The Indonesian navy has so far declined to comment on the crew found aboard the captured vessel.

[View gallery](#)



FILE - In this July 14, 2015 satellite image provided by DigitalGlobe, two fishing trawlers load sla ...

Pudjiastuti, who put a moratorium on all foreign boats last year to crack down on rampant poaching, said the Silver Sea 2 captain will be questioned, and an investigation will be launched into suspected human trafficking, transport of illegally caught fish and transshipment, which involves offloading fish at sea. It allows fishermen to work for months without returning to port, making it easier for their captains to exploit them.

"Indonesia's action here is significant as it demonstrates a commitment to enforcing the actions of vessels within their waters, regardless of whether they are fishing illegally or trafficking labor," said Tobias Aguirre, executive director of California-based nonprofit Fishwise, which advocates for sustainable, slave-free seafood.

Authorities in Papua New Guinea had also been searching for the boat. They instead seized another Thai-owned fish cargo ship, the Blissful Reefer, two weeks ago. Two trafficked Burmese and six Cambodians were found on board.

Indonesian police also are investigating trafficking claims involving 45 Burmese fishermen who were rescued from a Jakarta hotel last week. Arie Dharmanto, who heads the anti-human trafficking unit of the National Police, said the men had fake documents identifying themselves as Thai, and that officials from two Indonesian companies have been questioned about their role.

Associated Press writers Niniek Karmini in Jakarta, Indonesia, Martha Mendoza in Santa Cruz, California, and Nattasuda Anusonadisai in Bangkok contributed to this report.

3- 45 Burmese fishermen rescued, suspected trafficking victims

By MARGIE MASON

Aug. 6, 2015 12:36 PM EDT

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/cd76da1def8c42198a51bcb3ac5cd62c/45-burmese-fishermen-rescued-suspected-trafficking-victims>

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesian police have rescued 45 Burmese fishermen, believed to be trafficking victims, from a hotel in central Jakarta where they were taken after traveling on fake documents, officials and the men said Thursday.

Authorities tracked down the group Wednesday by zeroing in on a cellphone signal, said Lt. Col. Arie Dharmanto, head of the National Police human trafficking unit. They had been brought to the capital from the eastern Indonesian island of Ambon.

"They apparently were human trafficking victims," said National Police Detective Chief Lt. Gen. Budi Waseso. "We are still investigating this case to reveal the human trafficking networks and who is the mastermind behind this."

Ambon is in the same island chain as the remote village of Benjina, which was exposed in March by The Associated Press as an area where hundreds of foreign fishermen from Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos were being forced to work as slaves on Thai-run boats. Some men were found in a cage there.

One of the newly rescued men who spoke to the AP said he was confused about what happened and how he and the others ended up in Jakarta. He said an agent lured them from Myanmar to Thailand with the promise of jobs there, but they were instead put on fishing boats and taken to Ambon, where they worked on four different vessels. He said all were issued fake Thai seamen documents, even though they are Myanmar nationals. He said they worked for the company for up to four years and had been paid less than what they were promised. Another man said he wasn't given a salary for three years.

"We were beaten on the boat and were not allowed to rest, even when we were sick," said the Burmese man, who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing retribution.

He said they were flown to Jakarta two months ago for documents and then returned to Ambon. They flew back to the capital again this week before being rescued. The reason for the two trips was not immediately clear.

Police are working to determine whether the men were trafficked and how they managed to travel without proper paperwork. They are being sheltered in a safe house for protection.

"They are just victims. We will uncover the truth, including how the network runs its crime and how it could happen here," Waseso said, adding that police will question and investigate the company that recruited the crew. Its name was not released.

The AP's report has caused a shakeup in the fishing industry. It resulted in the repatriation of more than 800 men. In addition, seven people have been arrested in Indonesia along with two others in Thailand in relation to the Benjina case. Other human trafficking cases continue to be investigated.

Associated Press writers Ali Kotarumalos and Niniek Karmini in Jakarta and Esther Htusan in Yangon, Myanmar, contributed to this report.

4- AP investigation prompts new round of slave rescues

By MARGIE MASON and MARTHA MENDOZA

Jul. 30, 2015 11:52 PM EDT

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/43d910ad09784c6ab019013bc1e2d348/ap-investigation-prompts-new-round-slave-rescues>

Authorities in Papua New Guinea have rescued eight fishermen held on board a Thai-owned refrigerated cargo ship, and dozens of other boats are still being sought in response to an Associated Press report that included satellite photos and locations of slave vessels at sea.

Two Burmese and six Cambodian men have been removed from the Blissful Reefer, a massive quarter-acre transport ship now impounded in Daru, Papua New Guinea, about 120 miles (200 kilometers) north of Australia. Officials said the fishermen appeared to be part of a larger group of forced laborers being transported from Thailand to be distributed onto various fishing boats, said George Gigauri, head of the International Organization for Migration in Port Moresby, which has assisted with the operation. He added that nearly 20 other crewmembers from the Blissful Reefer have not yet been questioned, and that if victims of trafficking are found, "there are lives at risk."

The men are part of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of poor migrants from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos who are forced to fish for the Thai seafood industry. When workers run away, become sick or even die, they are easily replaced by new recruits who are tricked or coerced by false promises of jobs in Thailand.

The story of Aung San Win, 19, who was among the rescued men, started the same way as with hundreds of other enslaved fishermen interviewed in person or in writing by AP during a year-long investigation into slavery at sea. He said a broker came to his home in Myanmar and convinced him and several other young men to go to Thailand where they could find good work in factories. But when they arrived, their passports and identification cards were taken. They were then pushed onto boats and told they would have to fish for three years and owed nearly \$600 for their documents, he said.

"They told us that we have to get off in this place and work here," said Aung, who added that it had taken about 20 days to reach Papua New Guinea, after stops in Singapore and Australia. "I don't want to work here. I don't even know what this place is."

Enslaved fishermen are routinely hauled from Thailand to work on smaller Thai trawlers in foreign waters where they are given little or no pay. Hundreds of former slaves told AP they were beaten or witnessed other crew members being attacked. They were routinely denied medicine, forced to work 22-hour shifts with no days off and given inadequate food and impure water.

The ship seized in Papua New Guinea, the Blissful Reefer, appears to be connected to a trafficking ring exposed by the AP that was sending seafood caught by slaves around the Indonesian island of Benjina to the United States. The Blissful Reefer is listed by Indonesian authorities as one of nine massive seafood transporters chartered by the fishing company in Benjina. And documents from the men on board showed they were brought to work on two trawlers, Chainavee 12 and Chainavee 24, from the same family of vessels AP found in Benjina.

The AP investigation revealed fishermen being held in a cage, buried under fake names in a company graveyard and trapped for years with no way to return home. Journalists followed their 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.

The report prompted rescues and repatriation of more than 800 men, and seven people have been charged with human trafficking.

In the past four months, AP has been tracking down another 34 boats, with as many as 20 men aboard each, that fled the slave island well before authorities and investigators arrived. First-hand accounts, satellite photos and public records located at least some of the vessels in a narrow, dangerous strait in western Papua New Guinea.

Authorities there then searched the fishing grounds, called the dogleg, with aircraft and stopped the Blissful Reefer. The prime minister's office in Papua New Guinea and the National Fisheries Authority did not respond to requests for comment.

Indonesia Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti, whose investigators had been chasing the boats from Benjina, said she has asked Papua New Guinea to send back any illegal trawlers that fled her country for prosecution.

International Organization for Migration spokesman Leonard Doyle told a United Nations briefing in Geneva that AP had alerted authorities last week about suspect boats and searchers had found "a group of mariners from one of these vessels to be victims of trafficking." But time is ticking to find the others. All foreign boats must leave the Papua New Guinea strait by Friday, when a fishing moratorium will be put in place to clamp down on poaching, according to the National Fisheries Authority.

A patrol boat is expected to be sent to search waters in the strait along with a surveillance plane, Gigauri said. The eight men aboard the Blissful Reefer will be returned home.

Esther Htusan contributed to this report from Yangon, Myanmar.

5- AP Exclusive: AP tracks slave boats to Papua New Guinea

By ROBIN MCDOWELL, MARTHA MENDOZA and MARGIE MASON

Jul. 27, 2015 9:13 AM EDT

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/c2fe8406ff7145a8b484deae3f748aa5/ap-tracks-missing-slave-fishing-boats-papua-new-guinea>

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — From 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.

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 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 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 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 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."

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 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 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."

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 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 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."

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

6- 22 Years a Slave One Man's Homecoming

By MARGIE MASON Associated Press

July 1, 2015

<http://interactives.ap.org/2015/22-years-a-slave/>

All he did was ask to go home.

The last time the Burmese slave made the same request, he was beaten almost to death. But after being gone eight years and forced to work on a boat in faraway Indonesia, Myint Naing was willing to risk everything to see his mother again. His nights were filled with dreams of her, and time was slowly stealing her face from his memory. So he threw himself on the ground and roped his arms around the captain's legs to beg for freedom.



Myint Naing lost more than two decades of his life to slavery.

The Thai skipper barked loud enough for all to hear that Myint would be killed for trying to abandon ship. Then he flung the fisherman onto the deck and chained down his arms and legs.

Myint was left for three days to burn in the searing sun and shiver in the nighttime rain, without food or water. He wondered how he would be killed. Would they throw his body overboard to wash up on shore, like the other corpses he'd seen? Would they shoot him? Or would they simply bash his head open, as they had done before?

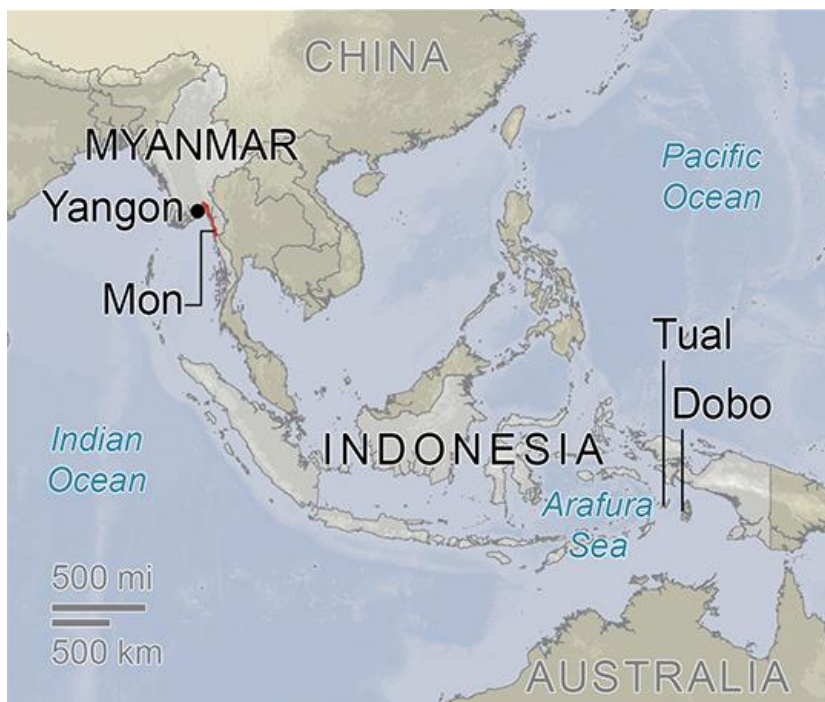
He was never going to see his mother again. He would simply disappear, and she wouldn't even know where to look.

Every year, thousands of migrant workers like Myint are tricked or sold into the seafood industry's gritty underworld. It's a brutal trade that has operated for decades as an open secret in Southeast Asia's waters, where unscrupulous companies rely on slaves to supply fish to major supermarkets and stores worldwide.

As part of a year-long investigation into the multibillion-dollar business, The Associated Press interviewed more than 340 current and former slaves, in person or in writing. The stories told by one after another are strikingly similar.

Myint is a thin, soft-spoken man with the wiry strength of someone who has worked hard all his life. Illness has left his right arm partly paralyzed and his mouth clenched into a forced half-smile. But when he breaks into laughter, you see flashes of the boy he once was, despite all that has happened in between — a 22-year odyssey recounted by Myint and his relatives.

He comes from a small village off a narrow, dusty road in southern Myanmar's Mon State, the oldest of four boys and two girls. In 1990, his father drowned while fishing, leaving him as the man in charge at just 15. He helped cook, wash clothes and care for his siblings, but they kept sliding deeper into poverty.



As a young man, Myint left his family in Myanmar's Mon state and was swept into a life of forced labor in eastern Indonesia.

So when a fast-talking broker visited the neighborhood three years later with stories of jobs in Thailand, Myint was easily wooed. The agent offered \$300 for just a few months of work — enough for some families to survive on for a year. He and several other young men quickly put their hands up to go.

His mother, Khin Than, wasn't so sure. He was only 18 years old, with no education or travel experience. But he kept begging, arguing that he wouldn't be gone long and relatives already working there could look after him.

Finally, she relented.

Neither of them knew it but, at that moment, Myint began a journey that would take him thousands of miles away from his family. He would miss births, deaths, marriages and the unlikely transition of his country from a dictatorship to a bumpy democracy. He would run away twice from the ruthless forced labor on a fishing boat, only to realize that he could never escape from the shadow of fear.

Yet on the day he left home in 1993, all Myint saw was promise. The broker hustled his new recruits to grab their bags immediately, and Myint's 10-year-old sister wiped tears from her cheeks as she watched him walk down the dirt track away from their village.

His mother wasn't home. He never got to say goodbye.

Thailand earns \$7 billion a year from a seafood industry that runs on labor from the poorest parts of the country, along with Cambodia, Laos and especially Myanmar, otherwise known as Burma. Up to 200,000 estimated migrants, most of them illegal, work at sea. Their catch ends up halfway around the globe in the United States, Europe and Japan — on dinner tables and in cat food bowls.

Annual estimated profits from forced labor

Asia-Pacific	\$51.8 billion
Developed economies and European Union	\$46.9 billion
Central and Southeastern Europe	\$18.0 billion
Africa	\$13.1 billion
Latin America and the Caribbean	\$12.0 billion
Middle East	\$8.5 billion

SOURCE: International Labor Organization

As overfishing decimates stocks near Thailand's shores, trawlers have been forced to venture farther and farther into more plentiful foreign waters. The dangerous work keeps men at sea for months or even years with fake Thai identity documents, trapped aboard floating prisons run by captains with impunity. Though Thai officials deny it, they have long been accused of turning a blind eye to such practices.

After easily skirting police at the border with Thailand and being held in a small shed with little food for more than a month, Myint was shoved onto a boat. The men were at sea for 15 days and finally docked in the far eastern corner of Indonesia. The captain shouted that everyone on board now belonged to

him, using words Myint would never forget: “You Burmese are never going home. You were sold, and no one is ever coming to rescue you.”

“You were sold, and no one is ever coming to rescue you.”-Slave captain

He was panicked and confused. He thought he would be fishing in Thai waters for only a few months. Instead the boys were taken to the Indonesian island of Tual in the Arafura Sea, one of the world’s richest fishing grounds, stocked with tuna, mackerel, squid, shrimp and other lucrative species for export.

Myint spent weeks at a time on the open ocean, living only on rice and the parts of the catch no one else would eat. During the busiest times, the men worked up to 24 hours a day, hoisting heavy nets rippling with fish. They were forced to drink foul-tasting boiled sea water.

He was paid only \$10 a month, and sometimes not at all. There was no medicine. Anyone who took a break or fell ill was beaten by the Thai captain, who once lobbed a piece of wood at Myint for not moving fish fast enough.



CHAINED: Myint describes being put in chains after asking to go home.

Nearly half the Burmese men surveyed by the AP said they were beaten, or witnessed others being abused. They were made to work almost nonstop for nearly no pay, with little food and unclean water. They were whipped with toxic stingray tails, shocked with Taser-like devices and locked in a cage for taking breaks or attempting to flee.

Sometimes, the men said, the bodies of those who died were stashed in the ship’s freezer alongside the fish.

Workers on some boats were killed for slowing down or trying to jump ship. The Burmese fishermen said others flung themselves overboard because they saw no escape. Myint spotted several bloated bodies floating in the water.

By 1996, after three years, he had had enough. Penniless and homesick, he waited until his boat returned to Tual. Then he went into the office on the dock and, for the first time, asked to go home.

His request was answered by a helmet cracking his skull. As blood oozed out, he used both hands to hold the wound together. The Thai man who hit him repeated the words that already haunted him: "We will never let you Burmese fishermen go. Even when you die."

"We will never let you Burmese fishermen go. Even when you die."

-Thai man who used a helmet to crack Myint's skull

That was the first time he ran away.

On islands scattered throughout Indonesia's Maluku chain, also known as the Spice Islands, thousands of migrant fishermen who have escaped or been abandoned by their captains quietly hide out in the jungle. Some start families with local women, partly to protect themselves from slave catchers. It's risky, but one of the only ways to find a semblance of freedom.

An Indonesian family took mercy on Myint until he healed, and then offered him food and shelter in exchange for work on their farm.

For five years, he lived this simple life and tried to erase memories of the horrors at sea. He learned to speak the Indonesian language fluently and acquired a taste for the food, even though it was much sweeter than the salty Burmese dishes his mother fixed.

But he couldn't forget his relatives in Myanmar or the friends he left behind on the boat. What happened to them? Were they still alive?

Sometimes Myint quietly visited other runaway Burmese slaves on the island to talk about home, bringing a big bag of vegetables he grew himself.

"He was a bit afraid to go around," remembered Naing Oo, another former Burmese slave in Tual. "It was very brutal on the fishing boats."

In the meantime, the world around him was changing. By 1998, Indonesia's longtime dictator Suharto had fallen, and the country was moving toward democracy. Myint wondered if maybe things were getting better on the ships too.

In 2001, he heard one captain was offering to take fishermen back to Myanmar if they agreed to work. He was determined to find a way home. So, eight years after he first arrived in Indonesia, he returned to the sea.

Right away, he knew he'd fallen into the same trap again. The work and conditions were just as appalling as the first time, and the money still didn't come.

If anything, the slavery was getting worse. Thailand was rapidly becoming one of the world's biggest seafood exporters, and needed more cheap labor. Brokers deceived, coerced or sometimes even drugged and kidnapped migrant workers, including children, the sick and the disabled.

After nine months on the water, Myint's captain broke his promise and told the crew he was abandoning them to go back to Thailand alone.

Furious and desperate, the Burmese slave once again pleaded to go home. That, he said, was when the captain chained him to the boat for three days.

Myint searched wildly for something, anything, to open the lock. Working it with his fingers was useless. Then he managed to fashion a small piece of metal into a makeshift pick and spent hours trying to quickly and quietly unlatch freedom. Finally, there was a click. The shackles slid off. He knew there wasn't much time, and if he got caught, death would come swiftly.

Sometime after midnight, he dove into the black water and swam to shore. Then he ran without looking back, in clothes still weighted by sea water. He knew he had to disappear. This time, for good.

The slave trade in the Southeast Asian seafood industry is remarkable in its resilience. Over the past decade, outsiders have begun to take notice, and the U.S. government slams Thailand in annual reports year after year for pervasive labor abuses in fishing. Yet it continues, and it seldom lets go of the lives of those it ruins.

After he ran the second time, Myint hid alone in a bamboo shack in the jungle. But just three years later, he fell ill with what appeared to be a stroke. His nerves seemed to stop firing properly, leaving him easily chilled despite the oppressive tropical heat.

When he became too sick to work, the same Indonesian family cared for him with a kindness that reminded him of relatives back home. He had forgotten what his mother looked like, and knew that by now his favorite little sister would be all grown up. They likely thought he was dead.

What he didn't know was that his mother was like him: She never gave up. She prayed for him every day at the little Buddhist altar in her family's traditional stilt house, and asked fortune tellers year after year about her son. They assured her he was alive, but in a faraway place difficult to leave.



HEARTBREAK: Myint's mother talks about being separated from her son.

At one point, another Burmese man told the family that Myint was fishing in Indonesia and married. But Myint never wanted to be tethered to the country that had destroyed his life.

"I didn't want an Indonesian wife, I just wanted to go back home to Myanmar," he said. "I felt like I lost my young man's life. I just thought that all of this time, I should have been in Burma having a wife and a proper family."

After eight more years in the jungle without a clock or calendar, time began to blur. Now in his 30s, he started to believe the captain had been right: There really was no escape.

He couldn't go to the police or local officials, afraid they might hand him over to the captains for a fee. He had no way to call home. And he was scared to contact the Myanmar embassy because it would expose him as an illegal migrant.

In 2011, the solitude had become too much. Myint moved to the island of Dobo, where he had heard there were more Burmese. He and two other runaway slaves farmed chilies, eggplant, peas and beans until the police arrested one in the market and put him back on a boat. The man later fell sick at sea and died.

It was yet another reminder to Myint that if he wanted to survive, he needed to do it carefully.

One day in April, a friend came to him with news: An AP report linking slavery in the seafood industry to some of the biggest American grocery stores and pet food companies had spurred the Indonesian government to start rescuing current and former slaves on the islands. To date, more than 800 have been found and repatriated.

This was his chance. When the officials came to Dobo, he went back with them to Tual, where he was once a slave — this time to join hundreds of other free men. After 22 years in Indonesia, Myint was finally going home. But what, he wondered, would he find?

The flight from Indonesia to Myanmar's biggest city, Yangon, was a terrifying first for Myint. He walked out of the airport with a small black suitcase and a donated hat and shirt — all he had to show for his long time abroad.

Myint was coming back a stranger to his own country. Myanmar was no longer ruled by a secretive military government, and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was free from years of house arrest and in Parliament.





JOURNEY: Myint's long trip home included a joyous arrival to Myanmar's international airport in Yangon (top), a festive bus ride with other former slaves, a weary interview with Burmese anti-trafficking officials and a pensive departure from a government hostel (bottom).

The currency was baffling. He struggled to convert 15,000 Indonesian rupiah into about 1,000 Myanmar kyat, both roughly \$1.

"I feel like a tourist," he said, sweat dripping down his face and chest. "I feel Indonesian."

The food was different, and so were the greetings. Myint kept shaking hands and touching his heart the Indonesian way, instead of bowing with his hands in a prayer position like a Burmese.

Even the words seemed odd. While he waited with other former slaves for the bus to Mon State, they chatted not in their native Burmese, but in Bahasa Indonesia.

"I don't want to speak that language anymore because I suffered so much there," he said. "I hate that language now." Yet he continued to slip in and out of it.

Most of all, just as the country had changed, so had he. He had left as a boy, but was returning a 40-year-old man who had been enslaved or in hiding for more than half his life. And he was the only one from his village to come back at all.

When he reached his home state, Myint's emotions started to fray. He was too nervous to eat. He fidgeted, running his hands through his hair and constantly rubbing the heart-shaped abalone pendant around his neck. Finally, it all became too much, and he started to sob.

"My life was just so bad that it hurts me a lot to think about it," he choked out. "I miss my mom."

He wondered if he would even recognize his mother and sister, or if they would remember him.

An hour later, he slapped his head in frustration as he tried to remember which way to go. The roads were now paved and lined with new buildings. He rubbed his palms on his pants and squirmed in excitement when he recognized a police station. He knew he was close.

Finally, the car he was riding in turned into a small village. He called a phone number that he had gotten only the day before. Seconds later, when he saw a plump Burmese woman — on the same road that had led him away so many years ago — he knew immediately it was his little sister.

They exploded into an embrace, and the tears that spilled were of joy and mourning for all the lost time apart. "Brother, it's so good that you are back!" she sobbed. "We don't need money! We just need family! Now you are back, it's all that we need." But his mother was missing. Myint anxiously scanned the road as his sister frantically dialed a number.



REUNION: Shortly after an emotional reunion with his sister, Myint buried his face in his hands and fell to the ground upon seeing his mother.

And then a small, frail figure with gray-streaked hair began to run. When he spotted her, he howled and fell to the ground, burying his face in his hands. She swept him up in her arms and softly stroked his head, cradling him as he let everything go.

They wailed and wept so loudly, the whole village emerged to see what seemed like a ghost. “That guy’s been gone for 20 years,” one man said.

Myint, his mother and his sister walked arm-in-arm to the simple stilt house of his childhood. At the front gate, he crouched on his knees, and they heaved water with a traditional tamarind soap on his head to cleanse away evil spirits.

As his sister helped wash his hair, his 60-year-old mother turned pale and collapsed against a bamboo ladder. Then, suddenly, she grabbed her heart and began to gasp for air. Relatives and neighbors fanned her and fetched water and a lime to smell, but her eyes rolled back into her head. Someone yelled that she wasn’t breathing.

Myint ran to her, dripping wet, and blew three breaths into her mouth.

“Open your eyes! Open your eyes!” he screamed, beating his chest with both hands. “I’ll look after you from now on! I will make you happy! I don’t want to see you sick! I am back home!”

She slowly revived, and Myint took a long look into her eyes. He was finally free to see the face from his dreams. He would never forget it again.





HOME: Myint's mother (top) was momentarily overcome in the emotion of her son's long-awaited return, but she soon recovered. The family became reacquainted and Myint met his niece and nephew (bottom) for the first time.

WHERE THIS STORY CAME FROM:

Myint Naing's story comes from interviews with him, his family, his friends and other former slaves, and through following his journey from a makeshift camp set up for rescued men at an Indonesian port in Tual, Indonesia, to his home in Myanmar. He's among hundreds rescued and returned to their families after a yearlong AP investigation exposed extreme labor abuses in Southeast Asia's seafood industry. Reporters documented how slave-caught fish is shipped from Indonesia to Thailand. It can then be exported to the United States and cloud the supply chains of supermarkets and distributors, including Wal-Mart, Sysco and Kroger, and pet food brands, such as Fancy Feast, Meow Mix and Iams. The companies have all said they strongly condemn labor abuse and are taking steps to prevent it.

7-Human trafficking: 7 arrested in Indonesia

By Margie Mason ASSOCIATED PRESS
Tuesday May 12, 2015 11:18 PM

http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/national_world/2015/05/12/7-arrested-in-indonesia-in-seafood-slavery-case.html

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Two Indonesians and five Thais have been arrested on charges of human trafficking connected with slavery in the seafood industry, Indonesian police said. They were the first suspects taken into custody since the case was revealed two months ago.

The arrests were made on Monday and late Friday in the remote island village of Benjina, said Lt. Col. Arie Dharmanto, chief of the National Police anti-trafficking unit.

Five Thai boat captains and two Indonesian employees at Pusaka Benjina Resources, one of the largest fishing firms in eastern Indonesia, were taken into custody. The arrests come after the Associated Press reported on slave-caught seafood shipped from Benjina to Thailand, where it can enter the supply chains of some of America's biggest food retailers.

“They have committed an extraordinary crime, and we will not let it happen again in Indonesia,” Dharmanto said on Tuesday. “We will not stop here. We will pursue those who are involved in this case, whoever they are.”

Police will recommend that the men be charged by prosecutors. If they go to trial, they could face jail sentences of up to 15 years and fines as high as \$46,000, he said.

He said the number of suspects likely will climb because authorities still are investigating how thousands of fishermen from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand were put on fishing boats in Thailand, taken to work in Indonesian waters and not allowed to leave. Many said they were beaten and forced to work up to 24 hours a day with inadequate food and unclean water. Most were paid little or nothing at all.

Gavin Gibbons, spokesman for the National Fisheries Institute, which represents about 75 percent of U.S. seafood sellers, said they are eager to see the cases prosecuted.

8- House panel is told of slavery in Thai seafood industry

By Martha Mendoza THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted Apr. 22, 2015 at 7:54 PM <http://www.telegram.com/article/20150422/NEWS/304229575>

WASHINGTON — Modern-day slavery persists around the world, including the abuse of fishermen in the Thai seafood industry whose catch can end up in U.S. markets, a congressional panel was told Wednesday.

"As has been reported for years, the Thai fishing industry is rife with forced labor, both on the high seas and within seafood processing and packing plants," Mark Lagon, former State Department ambassador for trafficking in persons, told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee.

Lagon, who now heads Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that advocates for human rights, said it remains to be seen whether the Obama administration will impose sanctions it is authorized to deploy, which would bar Thai seafood from U.S. markets.

The State Department's key weapon for combatting human trafficking comes in a politically charged annual ranking in "tiers"— Tier 1 is best, 2 means more could be done, and 3 is a blacklist that can spark sanctions. The House global human rights subcommittee urged the Obama administration to come down hard on those countries that violate human rights when it releases the report in June.

Rep. Chris Smith said China was prematurely upgraded to Tier 2 in 2014, and singled out Myanmar, also known as Burma, Malaysia and Thailand as countries that need to do more to fight human trafficking across shared borders. Unless they've dramatically changed their law enforcement, several African countries face automatic downgrades this year.

Smith said the rankings spur parliamentarians, law enforcement officials and advocates globally "to demand real, measurable change in countries struggling to fight slavery."

Matthew Smith, who directs Thailand-based Fortify Rights, a nongovernment group, testified that hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims are displaced after widespread attacks in Myanmar and are at grave risk of being trafficked. And he said Myanmar women and girls are often subject to sexual and domestic servitude.

Last month The Associated Press reported on hundreds of fishermen whose catch is exported from Thailand to the U.S. who were working as modern day slaves, held in cages on the Indonesian island community of Benjina, whipped with sting ray barbs and forced to work at sea for years on end. To date, authorities have rescued some 370 of those men.

The fish they netted can wind up in the supply chains of some of America's biggest food sellers, such as Wal-Mart, Sysco and Kroger. It can also 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. The companies have all said they strongly condemn labor abuse and are taking steps to prevent it. And Thai authorities, whose \$7 billion seafood export industry counts the U.S. as a key customer, have said for years they are taking strong steps to clean up labor practices; yet documented abuses persist.

The AP also found the U.S. has enforced a law banning the import of goods made with forced labor just 39 times in 85 years because of a significant loophole: Slave-caught seafood and other items must be allowed in if consumer demand cannot be met without them.

Senate and House committees passed amendments this week to close that loophole.

"There is never a time when forced labor is OK. This is 2015, and there is absolutely no room in our trade policies for any exceptions to that principle," Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said during a meeting of the Senate Finance Committee, which approved the change Wednesday evening.

Among those rescued this month from Benjina by Indonesian authorities, Hlaing Min, 32, was told about the congressional hearing while awaiting repatriation to his homeland, Myanmar.

"I want to say to the congressmen that if I were to mention about all the human skulls and bones from the fishermen who died, the sea would be full of Burmese bones," he said. "On behalf of all the fishermen here, I request to the congressmen that the U.S. stop buying all fish from Thailand. If the label says Thailand, the U.S. should stop buying it."

9- Despite law, U.S. allowing imports of fish caught by slaves on Thai boats

Legal loopholes and politics lead to little action against labor abuses.

By MARTHA MENDOZA The Associated Press

April 21, 2015

<http://www.pressherald.com/2015/04/21/u-s-lets-in-thai-fish-caught-by-forced-labor-despite-law/>

WASHINGTON — Fourteen years after the U.S. first criticized Thailand for labor abuse in its annual trafficking report, seafood caught by slaves on Thai boats is still slipping into the supply chains of major American stores and supermarkets.

The U.S. has not enforced its own law banning the import of goods made with forced labor since 2000 because of significant loopholes, The Associated Press has found. It has also spared Thailand from sanctions slapped on other countries with similar records because of a complex political relationship that includes cooperation against terrorism.



Workers in Benjina, Indonesia, load fish onto a ship bound for Thailand. The U.S. government has criticized Thailand as a hub for labor abuse, yet seafood caught by men forced to work on Thai boats for little or no pay is still slipping into the supply chains of major U.S. stores. The Associated Press

The question of labor abuse in Thailand will come up at a congressional hearing Wednesday, in light of an AP investigation that found hundreds of men beaten, starved, forced to work with little or no pay and even held in a cage on the remote island village of Benjina, Indonesia.

While officials at federal agencies would not directly answer why the law and sanctions are not applied, they pointed out that the U.S. State Department last year blacklisted Thailand as among the worst offenders in its report.

“No one can claim ignorance anymore,” said Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia division. “This is a test case for Washington as much as Bangkok.”

Hlaing Min, an escaped migrant fisherman, begged the U.S. for help.

“Basically, we are slaves – and slavery is the only word that I can find – but our condition is worse than slavery,” he said. “On behalf of all the fishermen here, I request to the congressmen that the U.S. stop buying all fish from Thailand.... This fish, we caught it with our blood and sweat, but we don’t get a single benefit from it.”

While U.S. seafood companies strongly condemn labor abuse, some say cutting off all imports from an entire country takes away their power to change anything. And the Thai government says it is taking steps to solve the problem, including the creation of a new registry for migrant workers and increased punishment for traffickers.

The U.S. Tariff Act of 1930 gives Customs and Border Protection the authority to seize shipments where forced labor is suspected and block further imports. However, it has been used only 39 times in 85 years.

To start an investigation, Customs has to receive a petition from anyone – a business, an agency, even a non-citizen – showing “reasonably but not conclusively” that imports were made at least in part with forced labor. But spokesman Michael Friel said that in the last four years, Customs has received “only a handful of petitions,” and none on seafood from Thailand.

Experts also point to two gaping loopholes. Goods made with forced labor must be allowed into the U.S. if consumer demand cannot be met without them. And it’s hard, if not impossible, to prove who caught the fish in a particular container, because different batches generally mix together at processing plants.

Also, former Justice Department attorney Jim Rubin said, Customs can’t stop trafficked goods without the help of other federal agencies to investigate overseas.

Apart from the law, the U.S. response to Thailand is shaped by political considerations. Last year, after several waivers, the State Department dropped the Southeast Asian nation for the first time to the lowest rank in its trafficking report, mentioning forced labor in the seafood industry. Countries with the same ranking, such as Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria, faced full or partial sanctions. But Thailand did not, receiving \$18.5 million in aid from U.S. taxpayers last year.

The U.S. has already suspended \$4.7 million in military funding to Thailand because of a military coup last year. However, the country is still considered a critical ally against terrorism. The U.S. also wants strong relations with Thailand as a counterweight to the growing influence of China.

10- Hundreds of fishermen rescued amid Indonesian slavery probe

By ROBIN McDOWELL and MARGIE MASON

Published: April 4, 2015



Burmese fishermen raise their hands as they are asked who among them wants to go home at the compound of Pusaka Benjina Resources fishing company in Benjina, Aru Islands, Indonesia, Friday, April 3, 2015. Hundreds of foreign fishermen on Friday rushed at the chance to be rescued from the isolated island where an Associated Press report revealed slavery runs rampant in the industry. Indonesian officials investigating abuses offered to take them out of concern for the men's safety. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

BENJINA, Indonesia (AP) - Hundreds of fishermen raced to be rescued Friday from the isolated Indonesian island where an Associated Press investigation found that many were enslaved to catch seafood that could end up in the United States and elsewhere.

Indonesian officials probing labor abuses told the migrant workers they were allowing them to leave for another island by boat out of concern for their safety. More than 300 fishermen emerged from nearby trawlers, villages and even the jungle to make the trip.

"I will go see my parents," said Win Win Ko, 42, smiling to reveal a mouth full of missing teeth. "They haven't heard from me, and I haven't heard from them since I left."

He left impoverished Myanmar four years ago on the promise of getting a good job in neighboring Thailand, but like many others stranded in the island village of Benjina, he was instead duped into getting on a fishing boat that took him thousands of miles from home with no return. He said his four teeth were kicked out by a Thai boat captain's military boots because he was not moving fish fast enough from the deck to the hold below.

The current and former slaves began getting news about the rescue as a downpour started, and some ran through the rain. They sprinted back to their boats, jumping over the rails and throwing themselves through windows. They stuffed their meager belongings into plastic bags and rushed back to the dock, not wanting to be left behind.

A small boat went from trawler to trawler picking up men who wanted to go and was soon loaded down with about 30 men.

The Indonesian delegation began interviewing men on boats and assessing the situation on the island this week. They have heard of the same abuses fishermen told the AP in a story published last week, which documented a company graveyard in Benjina and eight fishermen locked in a company cage.

The fishermen described being beaten, kicked and whipped with stingray tails and given Taser-like electric shocks. Some said they fell ill and were not given medicine; others said had been promised jobs in Thailand but were instead issued fake seafarer documents and taken to Indonesia, where they were made to work 20- to 22-hour days with no time off for little or zero pay. Their catch is then shipped back to Thailand, where it enters global markets, the AP story documented.

Initially, Indonesian officials told about 20 men from Myanmar, also known as Burma, that they could be moved from Benjina to neighboring Tual island for their safety following interviews with officials on Friday. However, as news spread that some were getting to leave the island, dozens of others started filing in from all over and sitting on the floor. An official was later asked if those hiding in the forest could come as well.

"They can all come," said Asep Burhanuddin, director general of Indonesia's Marine Resources and Fisheries Surveillance. "We don't want to leave a single person behind."

The delegation said security in Benjina is limited, with only two Indonesian navy officials stationed there. The men crowded onto seven trawlers and will be moved to Tual over 24 hours. They will stay at a Fisheries Ministry compound until their identities can be verified.

"I expected to evacuate all of them, but I did not expect it this soon," said Ida Kusuma, one of the leaders of the Fisheries Ministry delegation. "But I think it's good."

Kusuma said the next step is to coordinate with immigration and their countries of origin.

The International Organization for Migration said last week there could be as many as 4,000 foreign men, many trafficked or enslaved, who are stranded on islands surrounding Benjina following a fishing moratorium called by the Indonesian Fisheries Ministry to crack down on poaching. Indonesia has some of the world's richest fishing grounds, and the government estimates billions of dollars in seafood are stolen from its waters by foreign crews every year.

Many of those leaving Benjina on Friday were Burmese, but about 50 refused to go, saying they had not received their salaries and did not want leave without money. Another 50 from Cambodia came forward in a group ready to leave.

Officials from Myanmar will visit the islands next week to look for more men and start the process of sending them home.

Thai fishermen will not be transported because they are not seen as a security risk since most of the boat captains in Benjina are from Thailand, Burhanuddin said.

Officials from Thailand visited the island earlier this week, but their trip was focused on finding Thai nationals who had been trafficked. They denied mistreatment on the boats and said the crews were all Thai, which directly contradicted what the Indonesians and the AP found.

"We examined the boats and the crews, and the result is most of the crews are happy and a few of them are sick and willing to go home," said Thai police Lt. Gen. Saritchai Anekwiang, who was leading the delegation. "Generally, the boat conditions are good."

The yearlong AP investigation used satellites to track seafood caught by the slaves from a large refrigerated cargo ship in Benjina to Thailand. The investigation linked the seafood to supply chains of some of America's largest supermarkets and retailers.

The report prompted the U.S. government and major seafood industry leaders to urge Thailand to end slavery at sea and to punish those responsible. Thailand's biggest seafood company, Thai Union Frozen Products, announced it was cutting ties with a supplier after determining it might be involved with forced labor and other abuses.

Police are investigating in Benjina and will decide whether to prosecute those involved, said Kedo Arya, head of Maluku province prosecutor's office.

While excitement and relief flooded through many of the fishermen assembled on the dock, some carrying suitcases or small rucksacks, others looked scared and unsure of what to expect next.

"I'm really happy, but I'm confused," said Nay Hla Win, 32. "I don't know what my future is in Myanmar."

Mason reported from Jakarta, Indonesia. Associated Press writer Ali Kotarumalos contributed to this report from Jakarta.

11- AP investigation prompts emergency rescue of 300 plus slaves

By ROBIN McDOWELL and MARGIE MASON

April 3, 2015 6:38 PM

<http://news.yahoo.com/fishermen-rush-rescued-amid-indonesian-slavery-probe-053153555.html#>

Associated Press Videos

Raw: Fishermen Rescued Amid Slavery Probe



Raw: Fishermen Rescued Amid Slavery Probe

[Raw: Fishermen Rescued Amid Slavery Probe](#)

[The Indonesian government on Friday began to move foreign fishermen from an isolated island where slavery in the fishing industry was exposed last week by an Associated Press investigation, out of concern for their safety. \(April 3\)](#)

BENJINA, Indonesia (AP) — At first the men filtered in by twos and threes, hearing whispers of a possible rescue.

Then, as the news rippled around the island, hundreds of weathered former and current slaves with long, greasy hair and tattoos streamed from their trawlers, down the hills, even out of the jungle, running toward what they had only dreamed of for years: Freedom.

"I will go see my parents. They haven't heard from me, and I haven't heard from them since I left," said Win Win Ko, 42, beaming, his smile showing missing teeth. The captain on his fishing boat had kicked out four teeth with his military boots, he said, because Win was not moving fish fast enough from the deck to the hold below.

The Burmese men were among hundreds of migrant workers revealed in an Associated Press investigation to have been lured or tricked into leaving their countries and forced into catching fish for consumers around the world, including the United States. In response to the AP's findings, Indonesian government officials visited the island village of Benjina on Friday and found brutal conditions, down to an "enforcer" paid to beat men up. They offered immediate evacuation.

The officials first gave the invitation for protection just to a small group of men who talked openly about their abuse. But then Asep Burhanuddin, director general of Indonesia's Marine Resources and Fisheries Surveillance, said everybody was welcome, including those hiding in the forest because they were too scared to go out.

"They can all come," he said. "We don't want to leave a single person behind."

About 320 men took up the offer. Even as a downpour started, some dashed through the rain. They sprinted back to their boats, jumped over the rails and threw themselves through windows. They stuffed their meager belongings into plastic bags, small suitcases and day packs, and rushed back to the dock, not wanting to be left behind.

A small boat going from trawler to trawler to pick up men was soon loaded down.

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Burmese fishermen run to collect their belongings after being informed that they can leave, at the c ...

Throughout the day and until darkness fell, they kept coming, more and more men, hugging, laughing, spilling onto the seven trawlers that were their ride out. Even just before the trawlers pushed off Benjina on the 24-hour trip to neighboring Tual island, fishermen were still running to the shore and clambering onto the vessels. Some were so sick and emaciated, they stumbled or had to be carried up the gang plank.

While excitement and relief flooded through many of the fishermen on the dock, others looked scared and unsure of what to expect next. Many complained they had no money to start over.

"I'm really happy, but I'm confused," said Nay Hla Win, 32. "I don't know what my future is in Myanmar."

Indonesian officials said security in Benjina is limited, with only two Navy officials stationed there to protect them. The men will be housed at a government compound while immigration is sorted out. Officials from Myanmar are set to visit the islands next week and will assist with bringing the men home and locating others.

The dramatic rescue came after a round of interviews Indonesian officials held with the fishermen, where they confirmed the abuse reported in the AP story, which included video of eight men locked in a cage and a slave graveyard. The men, mostly from Myanmar, talked of how they were beaten and

shocked with Taser-like devices at sea, forced to work almost nonstop without clean water or proper food, paid little or nothing and prevented from going home.

There was essentially no way out: The island is so remote, there was no phone service until a cell tower was installed last month, and it is a difficult place to reach in the best of circumstances.

The abuse went even further at the hands of the man known as "the enforcer." This man, deeply feared and hated by the workers, was hired by their boat captains to punish them for misbehavior, they said.

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Burmese fishermen raise their hands as they are asked who among them wants to go home at the compound ...

Saw Eail Htoo and Myo Naing were among those he tormented. After three months at sea working with only two to four hours of sleep a night, the two Burmese slaves just wanted to rest. They fell asleep on the deck.

Their Thai captain decided to make an example of them, they said. So the two were driven by motorbike to a hill above the port. They were handcuffed together and placed in front of an Indonesian flag. Then they were punched in the face and kicked until they collapsed into the dirt, they said, blood oozing from their ripped faces.

Even then, the enforcer would not stop.

"He kept kicking me," said Naing, rail-thin with a military-style haircut. "I kept thinking, if I was at home, this wouldn't be happening."

The findings documented by Indonesian officials and the AP came in stark contrast to what a Thai delegation reported from a visit to Benjina earlier this week to find trafficked Thai nationals. They denied mistreatment on the boats and said the crews were all Thai, even though the AP found many migrant workers from other countries are issued fake documents with Thai names and addresses.

"We examined the boats and the crews, and the result is most of the crews are happy and a few of them are sick and willing to go home," said Thai police Lt. Gen. Saritchai Anekwiang, who was leading the delegation. "Generally, the boat conditions are good."

Thailand, the world's third-largest seafood exporter, has been under further pressure to clean up its industry since the AP tracked slave-caught seafood out of Benjina by satellite and linked it to the supply chains of some of America's largest supermarkets and retailers. The U.S. State Department said Friday that it is pressing Myanmar to quickly repatriate the men. U.S. retailers also called for action and commended Indonesian officials.

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Burmese fishermen run to collect their belongings after being informed that they can leave, at the c ...
"We don't condone human trafficking in the supply chain, and we applaud the government's work to end this abuse. Our hearts go out to these men, and we wish them well on their journeys home," said Wal-Mart spokeswoman Marilee McInnis.

Last week, the International Organization for Migration said there could be as many as 4,000 foreign men, many trafficked or enslaved, who are stranded on islands surrounding Benjina following a fishing moratorium called by the Indonesian Fisheries Ministry to crack down on poaching. Indonesia has some of the world's richest fishing grounds, and the government estimates billions of dollars in seafood are stolen from its waters by foreign crews every year.

Three-quarters of the more than 320 migrant workers who left the island on Friday were Burmese, but about 50 from the country refused to go, saying they had not received their salaries and did not want leave without money.

Some were also from Cambodia and Laos. A few Thais were allowed to board the boats, but the Indonesians said Thai nationals could stay on Benjina more safely, since Thai captains were less likely to abuse them.

"I expected to evacuate all of them, but I did not expect it this soon," said Ida Kusuma, one of the leaders of the Fisheries Ministry delegation. "But I think it's good."

Police are investigating in Benjina and will decide whether to prosecute those involved in abuse, said Kedo Arya, head of Maluku province prosecutor's office. The Indonesian officials were told "the enforcer" was being detained.

For those like Naing, who recalled being tortured, beaten and locked in a room for a month and 17 days for simply falling asleep, the thought of finally leaving the island was impossible to believe.

"Is it real that we are going home?" he asked.

A firework soon shot off from one of the boats, signaling it was indeed time to go. The same trawlers where the fishermen had suffered years of abuse were heading back to sea. This time crowded with free men full of hope.

Mason reported from Jakarta, Indonesia. AP writer Ali Kotarumalos contributed to this report from Jakarta. AP writers Bradley Klapper in Washington D.C. and Martha Mendoza in San Jose, California, contributed to this story.

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