

Nestlé Reports on Abuses in Thailand's Seafood Industry

By Ian Urbina

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WASHINGTON — The seafood industry in Thailand suffers from widespread labor and human rights abuses, exposing virtually all American and European companies that buy seafood from there to the “endemic risk” of having these problems as part of their supply chain, according to a report released on Monday by the food giant Nestlé.

The report cataloged deceptive recruitment practices, hazardous working conditions and violence on fishing boats and in processing factories. It also faulted the industry for taking insufficient steps to ensure that workers were not underage.

Most of Thailand's seafood workers are migrants from neighboring Cambodia or Myanmar; they were brought into Thailand illegally by traffickers, provided fake documents and often sold to boat captains, the report said. On fishing boats, these workers routinely faced limited access to medical care for injuries or infection; worked 16-hour days, seven days a week; endured chronic sleep deprivation; and suffered from an insufficient supply of water for drinking, showering or cooking, the report found.

“Sometimes, the net is too heavy, and workers get pulled into the water and just disappear,” one Burmese worker said, according to the report. “When someone dies, he gets thrown into the water.”

Workers sometimes went a year before receiving any wages, and some faced physical and verbal abuse if they did not meet production quotas, the report said. Many of these problems were also described in an article in The New York Times in

July.

The report called for workers on fishing boats to be provided written contracts and for the industry to impose a “no fees to workers” rule that prohibits passing on the costs of a job to a worker. Only when companies and the Thai government confront the larger problem of human trafficking will they be able to counter the widespread abuses of these workers, the report concludes.

Nestlé said that next year it would announce new requirements for all potential suppliers as well as the details of a plan for hiring auditors to check for compliance with new rules. Because Nestlé is the world's biggest food company, the report says, “it is seen as a leader in the industry, and could have a positive impact on the whole industry by raising the bar on labor protection.”

The report was initiated in December 2014 and conducted by the nonprofit organization Verité, which interviewed more than 100 people in Thailand, including deckhands, boat owners and shrimp farmers.

“The report is a step in the right direction,” said Steve Berman, managing partner of the law firm Hagens Berman, which in August filed a class-action lawsuit against Nestlé, claiming that one of its brands, Fancy Feast cat food, was the product of forced labor. “But our litigation will go forward because Nestlé Purina still fails to disclose on its products, as is required by law, that slave labor was used in its making.”

Pisan Manawapat, the Thai ambassador to the United States, said that his government took these problems seriously. Nestlé's report was conducted largely before the Thai government took several recent major actions, he added.

Mr. Manawapat cited, for example, increased prosecutions of traffickers in recent months and new rules imposed in November that required tracking devices on all Thai fishing boats larger than 30 tons, that mandated independent observers on most Thai fishing boats in foreign waters, and that imposed stepped-up fines for boat operators caught using undocumented migrant workers.

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