

Federal government urged to take action against eight Chinese seafood companies over alleged abusive labour practices

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In this undated photo, crew members work on the squid-fishing lines on the deck of the Chinese squid-fishing boat, the Zhen Fa 7. FERDI ARNANDO VIA FACEBOOK/SUPPLIED

Two human-rights groups are petitioning the federal government to impose sanctions on eight Chinese companies over alleged rights violations, including forced labour and abuse of deckhands, committed on board Chinese squid fishing vessels.

The Human Rights Action Group and the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project want to see products associated with these companies blocked from entering the Canadian market, and say the federal government has taken “no action” so far on forced-labour imports, unlike the U.S.

“Gross violations” of human rights are rampant in the seafood industry, including on board Chinese squid ships, according to the 45-page joint submission, a copy of which was provided to The Globe and Mail. The document, filed to Global Affairs Canada, is based on findings from The Outlaw Ocean Project, a journalism non-profit. It published an investigation last year, revealing alleged systemic abuses on board Chinese fishing vessels and documenting the use of state-sponsored forced labour (primarily of Uyghurs and North Koreans) in seafood processing plants in China that export to Canada.

The two rights groups say the federal government has done little so far to tackle forced labour in seafood supply chains. U.S. authorities, meantime, have taken steps to ban imports from companies tied to the investigation.

China is buying its way into other countries’ fishing grounds, threatening livelihoods and depleting fish stocks

Canada urged to crack down on forced-labour imports after North Korean revelations

The U.S. approach “is robust in terms of sanctions, and intercepting and seizing imports,” while “Canada is a dumping ground” for forced-labour products, said Mehmet Tohti, URAP’s executive director.

The groups filed a different submission in Canada in December, which recommended the federal government impose sanctions on seven seafood processing companies with operations on land. The latest submission focuses on entities with operations at sea, and it also calls for sanctions against 16 individuals.

A review of both submissions is currently underway, Global Affairs said in an e-mail.

The groups are recommending sanctions be imposed under Canada’s Special Economic Measures Act.

The Globe reached out to the eight companies named in the petition for comment but did not hear back. Among the parent companies the Outlaw Ocean Project reached out to last year for comment on its coverage, none responded.

Canada implemented an import ban on goods produced by forced labour in 2020. To date, though, not a single shipment of goods made with forced labour has been blocked, the Canada Border Services Agency confirmed last week.

Sarah Teich, a lawyer who is co-founder and CEO of the Human Rights Action Group, said the government should toughen its position. “We can’t stop these companies from engaging in human-rights violations, but we can at least make sure we’re not complicit.”

U.S. authorities have taken action in response to the investigation. In June, they added a Chinese seafood company to a federal list that prohibits imports to the United States. Customs and Border Protection is now reviewing petitions on two vessels identified in the coverage. Previously, authorities also issued sanctions against two of the companies named in the petition.

One ship named in the recent submission is the Zhen Fa 7, owned by one of the named entities, which supplies North American markets, according to the Outlaw Ocean Project.

The investigation describes the case of an Indonesian deckhand, Daniel Aritonang, who lived and worked aboard this squid-fishing ship for a year and a half. He had suffered from a disease called beriberi, a thiamine deficiency disorder, and described being beaten and choked on the ship, before dying, hours after being left ashore, in 2021. (In an e-mailed response to the project last year, the ship’s owner, a subsidiary of Jiekou Group, said that it had found no evidence of abuses, such as physical violence, on the vessel.)

The investigation notes that beatings, illness and malnutrition are common, and found 43 dead crew, left on shore from 37 Chinese squid jiggers, between 2013 and 2022. It also recorded cases of forced labour, medical neglect, enforced isolation, wage deductions and sub-standard living conditions.

Ottawa has repeatedly said it will strengthen the import ban on goods produced with forced labour. It has also said it will table legislation by the end of this year to “eradicate forced labour from Canadian supply chains.”

Mr. Tohti, of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, has spent the past five years pressing the federal government to take a tougher stance, and says there’s been little response. He says research shows goods made with forced labour are sitting on Canadian shelves, not only from the seafood sector, but in auto parts, textiles, solar panels and food products.

“Canada talks the talk” about tackling forced labour, he says. “But it doesn’t walk the walk.”

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