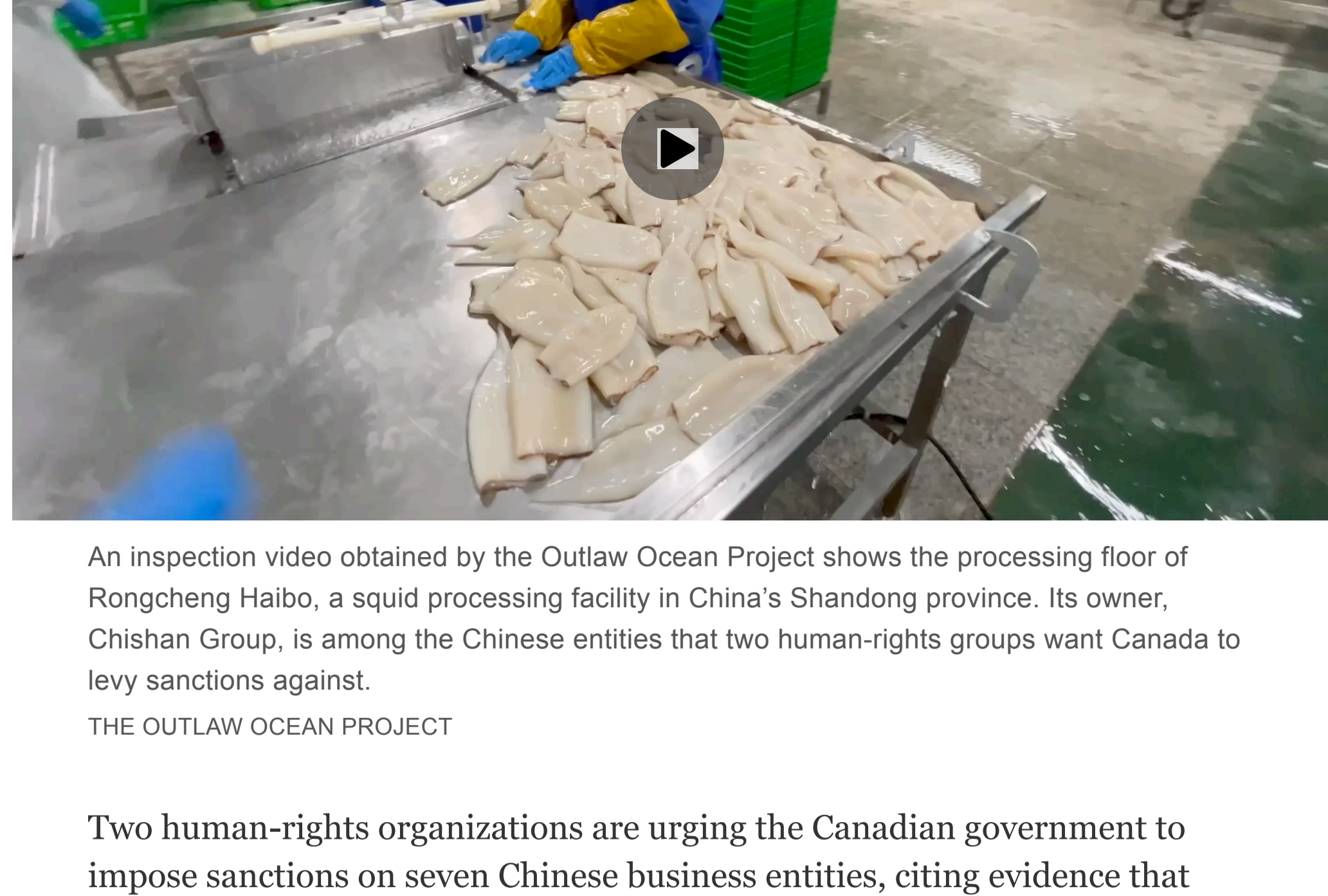


Human rights groups urge Canada to sanction Chinese seafood companies for ‘gross violations’

In written submission to the government, two human-rights groups say sanctions would send a message to both the Chinese companies and Canadian importers

TAVIA GRANT > AND LINDSAY JONES >
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An inspection video obtained by the Outlaw Ocean Project shows the processing floor of Rongcheng Haibo, a squid processing facility in China’s Shandong province. Its owner, Chishan Group, is among the Chinese entities that two human-rights groups want Canada to levy sanctions against.

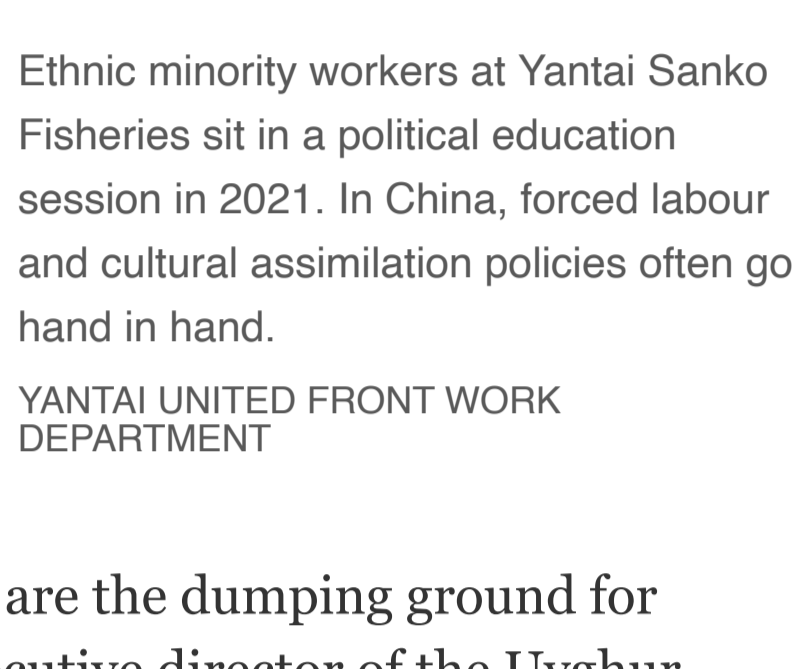
THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

Two human-rights organizations are urging the Canadian government to impose sanctions on seven Chinese business entities, citing evidence that they are responsible for “gross violations” of human rights committed against Uyghur workers in China’s seafood industry.

A [written submission](#) sent to Global Affairs Canada on Thursday by the two groups, the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project and the Human Rights Action Group, says imposing sanctions would send a message to the Chinese companies, and to the Canadian importers doing business with them, that products made using Uyghur forced labour will not be allowed to enter the Canadian market.

The submission is based on findings by The Outlaw Ocean Project, a journalism non-profit. The project’s recent [investigation](#), published by The Globe and Mail and other media outlets, found that at least 10 large seafood companies in China have used more than 1,000 Uyghur workers since 2018. Seafood from these plants, the investigation found, was purchased by major North American importers – including Nova Scotia-based High Liner Foods Inc., one of the largest seafood companies in Canada. High Liner has since cut ties with a seafood plant in China that is alleged to have used Uyghur labour.

Uyghurs, a largely Muslim group, millions of whom live in China’s western Xinjiang region, are an ethnic minority in the country. Media, researchers and human rights groups have documented a pattern of alleged human-rights abuses against them, including the imposition of a vast government-sponsored labour transfer program that coerces or forces Uyghurs into accepting jobs far from home.



Ethnic minority workers at Yantai Sanko Fisheries sit in a political education session in 2021. In China, forced labour and cultural assimilation policies often go hand in hand.

YANTAI UNITED FRONT WORK DEPARTMENT

The groups that filed Thursday’s submission on sanctions say Canada needs to take action, by blocking imports linked to coerced or forced labour.

In recent years, “nothing has happened in Canada in terms of tangible action. And still we are the dumping ground for forced-labour imports,” said Mehmet Tohti, executive director of the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project, which is based in Ottawa.

The seven companies named in the filing are Yantai Sanko Fisheries, Yantai Longwin Food, The Chishan Group, Shandong Meijia Group, Qingdao Tianyuan Aquatic Products, Rongsense Group and Xinjiang Zhongtai Zhihui Modern Service.



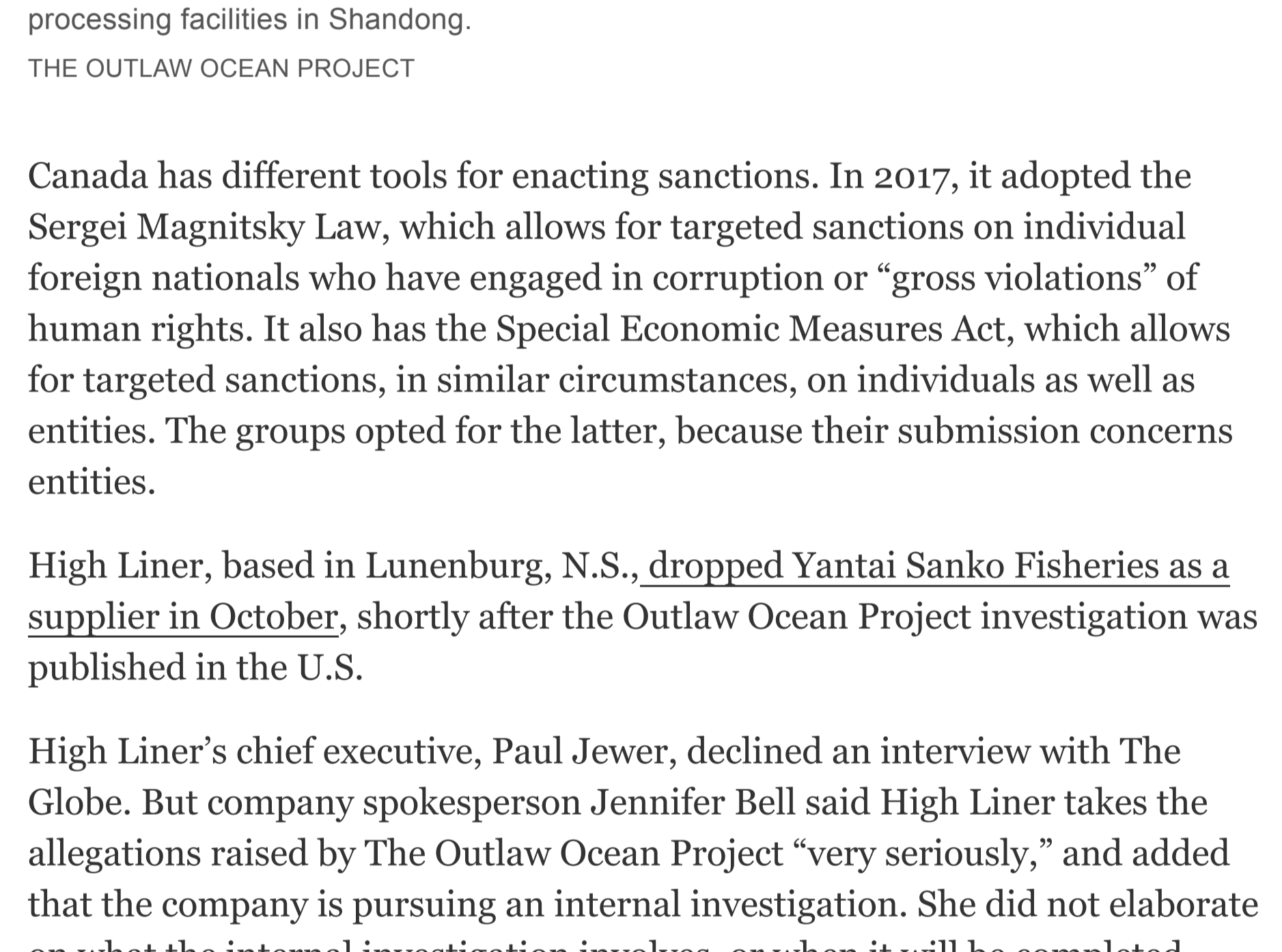
A Uyghur woman’s temperature is logged by an infrared scanner as she is transferred to Qingdao Tianyuan Aquatic Products Co. Ltd. in 2020.

JIAOZHOU NEWS CENTER

The submission, a copy of which was provided in advance to The Globe and Mail, says these entities have participated in human rights violations in China, “specifically in the context of Uyghur forced labour in the seafood industry in Xinjiang.” The submission says the companies should be added to the sanctions list under Canada’s Special Economic Measures Act – specifically a regulation under the act that was enacted in March, 2021, pertaining to China.

The Globe reached out to all seven entities by e-mail, and did not receive responses by deadline. In a previous [response](#) sent to The Ocean Outlaw Project, a lawyer for Chishan Group’s subsidiaries Haibo Seafood and Shandong Haidu said that there were no ethnic minorities from Xinjiang among the labourers at both units. A spokesperson for Qingdao Tianyuan [told](#) the project that the company has not “engaged in any form of illegal forced labour.” The other companies did not respond to The Outlaw Ocean Project’s requests for comment.

“We want to stop the imports,” said Sarah Teich, a co-founder of the Toronto-based Human Rights Action Group and one of two lawyers who prepared the submission. If these companies are added to the sanctions list, “then essentially Canadians would be prohibited from doing business with them ... It’s a way to get these products off of our shelves,” she said.



In a Chishan Group company promotional video, squid come off a ramp at one of their processing facilities in Shandong.

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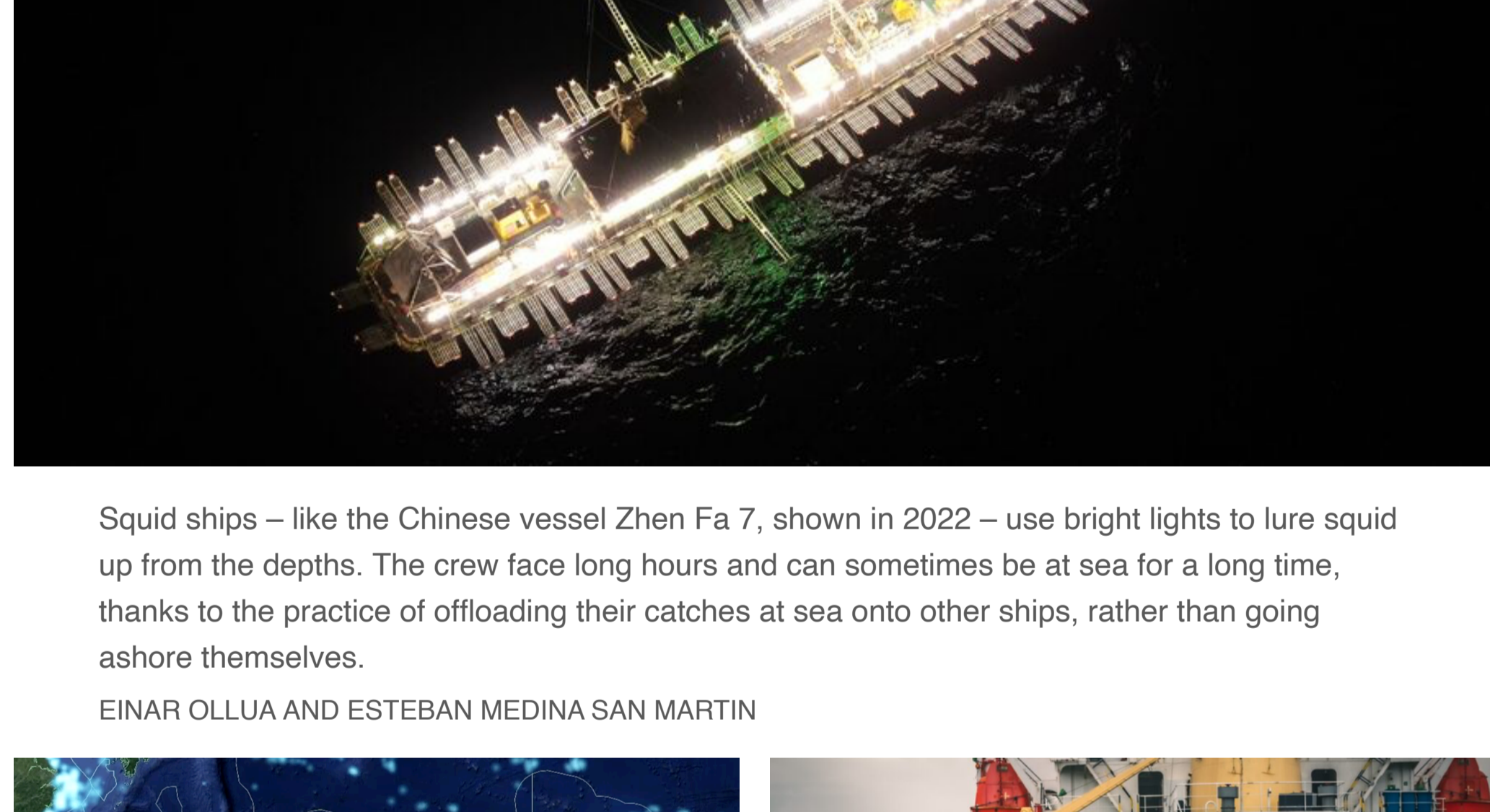
Canada has different tools for enacting sanctions. In 2017, it adopted the Sergei Magnitsky Law, which allows for targeted sanctions on individual foreign nationals who have engaged in corruption or “gross violations” of human rights. It also has the Special Economic Measures Act, which allows for targeted sanctions, in similar circumstances, on individuals as well as entities. The groups opted for the latter, because their submission concerns entities.

High Liner, based in Lunenburg, N.S., [dropped Yantai Sanko Fisheries as a supplier in October](#), shortly after the Outlaw Ocean Project investigation was published in the U.S.

High Liner’s chief executive, Paul Jewer, declined an interview with The Globe. But company spokesperson Jennifer Bell said High Liner takes the allegations raised by The Outlaw Ocean Project “very seriously,” and added that the company is pursuing an internal investigation. She did not elaborate on what the internal investigation involves, or when it will be completed.

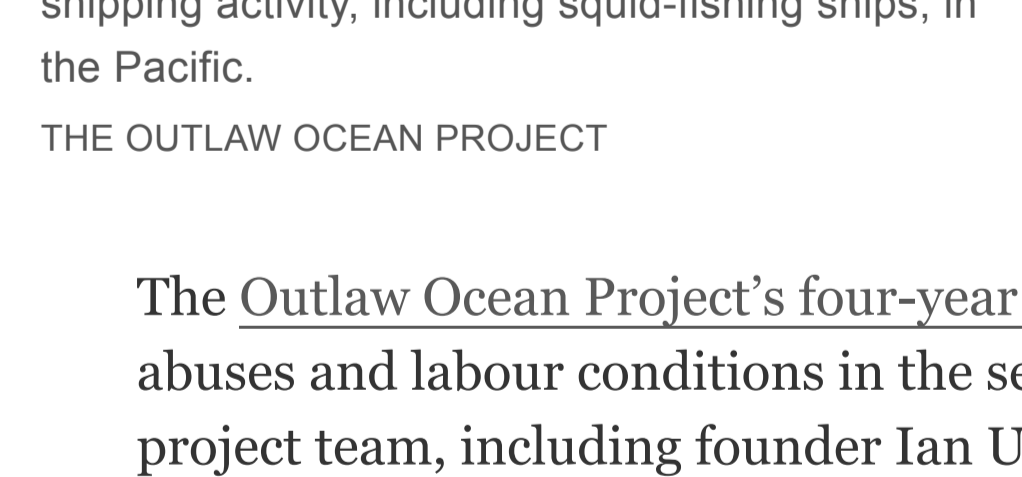
“We are committed to responsible operations in all that we do, and the decision to cease operations with Yantai Sanko Fisheries was made regardless of business impact,” she said.

Ms. Bell said High Liner has worked with two separate third-party auditors that provided it with clean results regarding forced labour in December, 2022 and again in August, 2023. She added that the company is working with NGOs and industry groups to identify opportunities for improvements in the way it addresses these matters. Ms. Bell declined to identify those NGOs and groups.



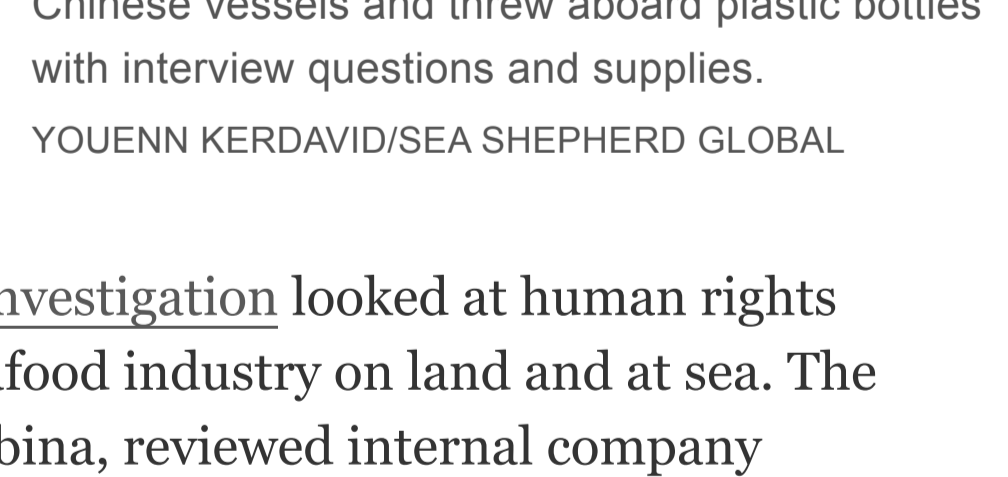
Squid ships – like the Chinese vessel Zhen Fa 7, shown in 2022 – use bright lights to lure squid up from the depths. The crew face long hours and can sometimes be at sea for a long time, thanks to the practice of offloading their catches at sea onto other ships, rather than going ashore themselves.

EINAR OLLUA AND ESTEBAN MEDINA SAN MARTIN



Tracking data from Global Fishing Watch shows shipping activity, including squid-fishing ships, in the Pacific.

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Reporters from The Outlaw Ocean Project trailed Chinese vessels and threw aboard plastic bottles with interview questions and supplies.

YOUENN KERDAVID/SEA SHEPHERD GLOBAL

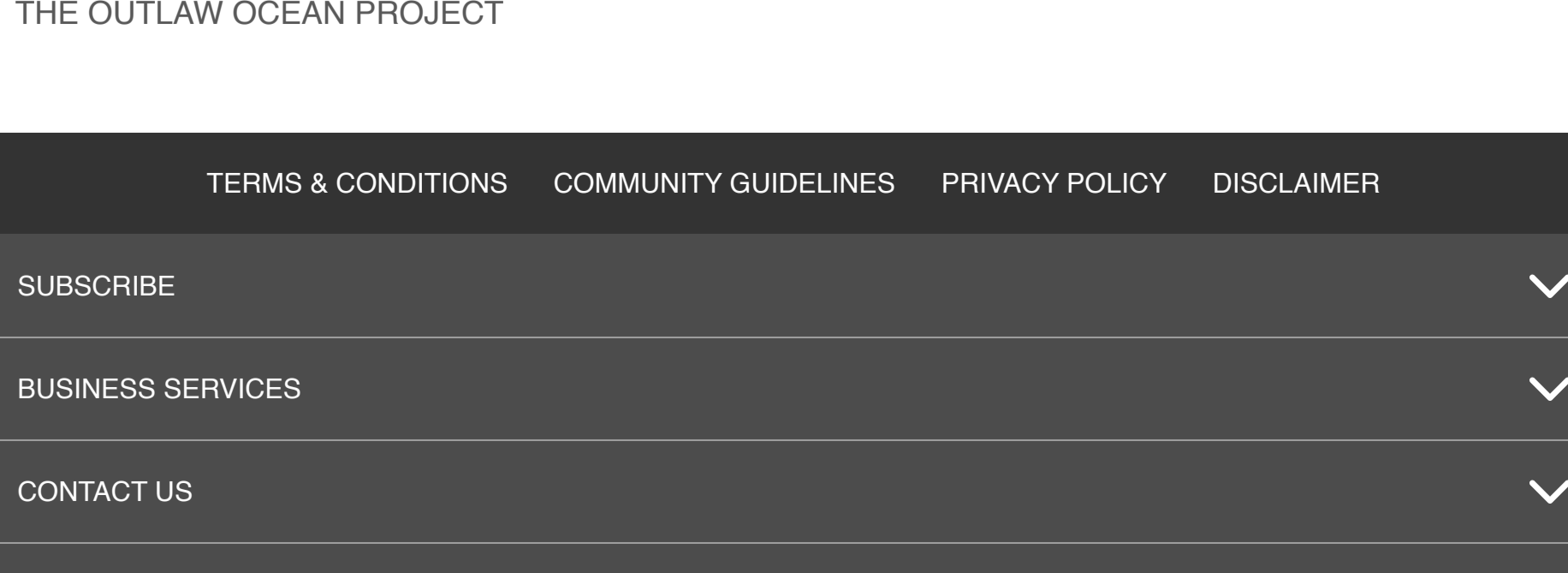
The [Outlaw Ocean Project’s four-year investigation](#) looked at human rights abuses and labour conditions in the seafood industry on land and at sea. The project team, including founder Ian Urbina, reviewed internal company newsletters, trade data and satellite imagery, along with thousands of videos uploaded to social media by Uyghur labourers. They found that Uyghurs are recruited and rounded up before being sent from Xinjiang to China’s coast, in Shandong province.

Canada has introduced measures aimed at addressing human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including prohibiting imports “produced wholly or in part by forced labour.” Critics say the government has a poor record of intercepting these goods. The federal government has pledged to introduce more legislation next year to eradicate imports made with forced labour.

In 2021, the U.S. Congress passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which presumes all goods with links to China’s Xinjiang region are made with forced labour, and bans them unless importers can provide evidence that their products aren’t made using such practices.

Mr. Tohti said Canada’s inaction contrasts with a tougher approach south of the border. “Canada continues to be complicit to the forced labour ... by buying their products, allowing their products to enter, and that Canadian pocket money is transferred to China, through these products,” he said. “It is really an embarrassment and huge frustration for me.”

In depth: How one Chinese company is accused of forced labour



In 2019, the Outlaw Ocean Project began investigating Chinese vessels fishing for squid in North Korean waters in breach of international sanctions. It led them to evidence of human-rights abuses and forced labour at Chishan Group, one of China’s largest exporters of squid.

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