



**AMBON:** In this Sept 8, 2015 photo, a Burmese fisherman, (center) is embraced by a friend as he leaves the port town. — AP

## 2,000 ENSLAVED FISHERMEN RESCUED IN OVER 6 MONTHS

### 'I'M SURE MY PARENTS THINK I'M DEAD'

**AMBON, Indonesia:** More than 2,000 fishermen have been rescued this year from brutal conditions at sea, their freedom prompted by an Associated Press investigation into seafood brought to the US 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 US 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 US, 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.

#### Isolated people

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 Iissara. "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.

#### Horrific conditions

A 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. — AP

## THAILAND OFFICIALS IN CORRUPTION MUSEUM

**BANGKOK:** Police stations paid for by the public but never built and backhanders to smuggle luxury cars into the country-welcome to the "Museum of Thai Corruption" where greedy officials take pride in place. Thais share a complex relationship with graft in a kingdom where under-the-table payments lubricate politics, the legal system and business deals. It is a country where a self-proclaimed anti-corruption crusader stands accused of malfeasance over a multi-million dollar scandal, and the ordinary taxpaying public-the ultimate victims of graft-routinely stump up bribes to get things done. Thailand sits 85th out of 175 countries in Transparency International's 2014 corruption perception index-level with India, Jamaica and Burkina Faso.

"Thailand is a country with a culture of patronage... many generations have seen corruption and got used to it," Mana Nimitmongkol from the Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand, who organized the exhibition, told AFP. "We wanted to create the museum in order to tell the cheaters that the things they have done are evil-they will be recorded in the history of Thailand, and Thai people will never forget, nor forgive them."

Life-size casts of greedy officials satirize some of the most notorious recent corruption cases. The figures of an unnamed man and woman behind a wall of broken rice sacks nod to a subsidy scheme introduced by the former civilian government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Critics say that scheme, which paid farmers twice the market rate for their crop, was riddled with corruption and cost the Thai exchequer billions of dollars in lost revenue and inflated subsidy.

The issue became a lightning rod for a street movement that led to Yingluck being ousted last year by the army. She denies wrongdoing but now faces trial over the case, which many Thais believe was the brainchild of her self-exiled billionaire brother Thaksin.

#### 'Tremendous damage'

But the ACT insists the exhibition is not partisan. And in the rough-and-tumble of Thai politics, even the firebrand leader of those anti-government protests does not escape the exhibition's attention. A bust of an unnamed man gobbling building pillars, captioned "the delicious meal of the police stations", dominates the room.

It references a scandal that saw the public coffers fleeced out of more than \$160 million to construct nearly 400 police stations-that were never built. Anti-graft officials have charged Suthep Thaugsuban, who was deputy prime minister at the time the contract was awarded, with malfeasance over that case that saw one company win the bid to build the stations. Suthep then went on to lead last year's movement against Yingluck, calling for her to be removed to excise corruption. There is also a sculpture of three guffawing officials draped over a bright yellow Ferrari-a long-running tax-dodging saga in which Thai customs officials helped smuggle luxury cars into the country without paying import duties.

The Thai junta has declared war on corruption, promising to slash the time it takes for graft cases to reach the courts. Organizers hope the exhibition will also become a rallying cry to ordinary Thais wearied by graft-and it has made an impact on the visitors so far. "Each sculpture illustrates national cases of corruption which trouble my heart, because each one has caused tremendous damage," said 19-year-old Tatpitcha Khanumsee. Another visitor, Anon Adhan, 30, praised the exhibition for its use of art to drive a "serious campaign". "We don't want corruption. That's why I support this campaign, by visiting, taking photos and sharing on social media," he added. — AFP



**BANGKOK:** In this photo taken on September 16, 2015, a man (left) looks at a sculpture displayed at the BACC (Bangkok Art & Culture Centre). — AFP