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Rights coalition urges European Union to extend yellow card for Thai seafood

More progress is needed to ensure human rights are respected groups say

A coalition of nearly 30 labor, environmental and human rights organizations sent a letter to the European Commission on Feb. 17 asking it to extend for at least another six months. The letter asks the Committee to take human rights into account when assessing Thailand's seafood sector. It also says that to demonstrate sufficient progress, Thailand should implement a time-bound action plan focused on effective enforcement to ensure substantial, measurable progress toward a legal, sustainable and ethical seafood industry.

The letter notes that Thailand has made some progress on monitoring, control and surveillance of vessels within its fishing fleet since the Commission first made its yellow card designation in April 2015, but cites concerns over lax enforcement of those measures and ongoing vulnerabilities among Thailand's migrant worker population that leaves them prone to exploitation in seafood harvesting and processing. It also criticizes the Thai government for use of criminal defamation to prosecute those who speak out about human trafficking.

If Thailand still fails to demonstrate improved enforcement of laws to protect human rights in its seafood sector after the extension period, the groups say that the Commission should consider issuing a red card. The organizations encourage the Commission to keep pressure on the government and the industry high until Thailand can demonstrate results from actions taken against human traffickers and their enablers, who force men and boys from Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos to endure a life of misery as victims of trafficking in the Thai seafood industry.

Quotations

"Thailand's lack of oversight over its fishing vessels has led to environmental degradation and some of the most exploitative and inhuman working conditions documented anywhere. The EU should consider these conditions in their decision-making on the yellow card and maintain pressure on Thailand until it takes the necessary action, that is durable over time, to ensure fishing crew are no longer vulnerable to trafficking, forced labor, physical violence and other abuses we have regularly documented in the Thai fleet." said Steve Trent, Executive Director of the Environmental Justice Foundation.

"Proper incentives will be critical to addressing decades of inadequate fisheries oversight and exploitation of migrant workers in Thailand," said Abby McGill, campaigns director at the International Labor Rights Forum. "The EU Commission should continue to push for measurable progress on enforcement until the Thai government demonstrates the political will to respect the rights of its migrant worker population and formalizes effective legal mechanisms to protect them."

"Thailand needs to recognize that pronouncements of commitment and intent are all well and good, but ultimately Bangkok will be judged on what it actually does to end the systematic and pervasive use of forced labor in its fishing fleets," said Brad Adams, Asia Director at Human Rights Watch. "The EU should be hard-nosed in its assessments and demand thorough implementation of sustained reforms to eradicate trafficking that will not simply falter when the global media spotlight shifts away -- because far too many lives of fishers on these vessels are at stake to do otherwise."