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ASIA PACIFIC

Overfishing Drives Thai Boats to Use More Slave Labor, Sail Further

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LONDON (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Decades of overfishing and the international demand for cheap seafood mean Thai boats are increasingly turning to slave labor as fishermen flee worsening working conditions, a rights group said on Wednesday.

Thai waters are one of the world's most over-fished regions, and Thai boats now catch just 14 percent of what they caught in the mid-1960s, according to the London-based Environment Justice Foundation (EJF).

To remain profitable, boats are forced to stay at sea for longer and go further afield than ever before. Some unregistered "pirate" boats are fishing the waters of other countries, also fuelling demand for modern-day slaves, the EJF said in a report.

As workers flee appalling conditions aboard the boats, catches decline and costs rise, vessel operators have resorted to using trafficked, bonded and forced labor to fill the shortfall and man their fishing boats, the EJF said.

"Producers and consumers of Thai seafood are embroiled in one of the most outrageous social and ecological crimes of the 21st century," EJF executive director Steve Trent said in a statement.

"Ecosystem decline and slavery exist in a vicious cycle," he added.

Thailand is the third largest seafood exporter in the world, with exports valued at \$7 billion in 2013, EJF said.

Poor regulation of the industry has led to the collapse of Thai fish stocks, and Thai authorities have little or no control over fishing vessels flying the Thai flag,

many of which openly use destructive fishing methods, the EJF said.

The depletion of fish stocks has pushed operators to target so-called the "trash fish" - much of it very young fish - used to produce shrimp feed, and this has in turn accelerated the exhaustion of Thailand's fish stocks, the report said.

"It is vital to address overfishing, pirate fishing and slavery in Thailand as one fundamentally interconnected problem," Trent said.

"The starting point must be an honest appraisal of the scale and extent of the social and environmental problems facing the Thai seafood industry," he added.

The Thai Foreign Affairs Ministry was not immediately available for comment.

In response to an EJF report about trafficking in the fishing industry published earlier this month, the ministry said the government was "acutely aware" of the vulnerability of migrant workers and others. It said it had stepped up efforts to "proactively identify and protect victims of trafficking".

Thailand was criticized last year for not doing enough to crack down on trafficking. The U.S. State Department downgraded it to its "tier 3" list of worst offenders - alongside 22 other countries including North Korea, Iran and Central African Republic - in its annual ranking of countries by their counter-trafficking efforts.

The Thai Foreign Affairs Ministry said last month, in its report aimed at moving up the U.S. rankings, that in 2014, 595 victims of human trafficking were identified, 280 cases investigated, 115 cases prosecuted and 104 people convicted.

These numbers are far smaller than those recorded in 2013, when 1,020 victims were identified, 674 cases investigated, 386 cases prosecuted and 225 people convicted.

(Additional reporting by Alisa Tang, Editing by Tim Pearce)