

# Thai government says it's not ignoring shrimp-sheds slavery

By Nattasuda Anusonadisai  
The Associated Press

**B**ANGKOK — Thailand's government says it is not ignoring the slavery and forced labor in its lucrative shrimp industry that was highlighted in an Associated Press investigation published in December.

Government spokesman Sansern Kaewkamnerd, flanked by police, navy, and other officials, held a news conference specifically to address issues raised by The AP story. The report has elicited widespread reactions around the world, including from major food companies in the U.S., Europe, and Australia that buy Thai seafood.

Sansern said the government was already aware of slavery in the industry before The AP report was released December 14.

"The report said that government officials ignore (this matter) ... This is not the truth," he said. "Authorities found it first," he said, adding that the Thai government wants the shrimp industry to have "proper working conditions according to international laws."

Thailand is one of the world's biggest shrimp providers and its seafood export industry is estimated to bring in about \$7 billion annually.

The AP report revealed the widespread use of undocumented migrant laborers, many from neighboring Myanmar. Many of the laborers end up being tricked or sold into shrimp-peeling sheds where they are forced to work 16-hour days with no time off and little or no pay for sometimes years at a time.

Many workers are held under debt bondage, forced to repay money the company gave to the agents who sold them. Some end up locked inside. Others are allowed to go out, but only if they leave their children or spouse behind as a guarantee against running away.

At the news conference, government



**SLAVERY SPIN.** Thai soldiers and a member of the Department of Special Investigation wake up a worker during a raid on a shrimp shed in Samut Sakhon, Thailand, in this November 9, 2015 file photo. Thailand's government says it is not ignoring the prevalence of slavery and forced labor in its lucrative shrimp industry. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara, File)

a man and his pregnant wife from Myanmar who had been trapped with nearly 100 other Burmese migrants, including children who worked alongside them. Among them was a girl so small she had to stand on a stool to reach the peeling tables.

Sansern said there might be five or 10 people like that couple, "but they don't represent all 3 million migrant workers that Thailand looks after."

Sansern said pictures showing children seated with parents at the work table reflects "Asian lifestyle" and not necessarily child labor. But he added that this needs to change and said authorities are now allocating space for children away from the work area.

Kornchai Klayklueg, the head of the anti-human trafficking wing of the police, told the same news conference that "a number of things, including the report about debt-bound laborers, interest us, and we are looking into it and will prosecute" the culprits.

A day after The AP report, Thiraphong Chansiri, the president of Thai Union, one of the world's biggest seafood exporters, expressed frustration and promised change. He said The AP investigation should be a "wake-up call" to the industry. Many exporters have bought shrimp from, or outsourced peeling work to, smaller operators who have less oversight.

Thai Union announced in mid-December that it would conduct all pre-processing of shrimp in-house, and stop using outside companies to do the work, by the end of the year. A week later, the Thai Frozen Foods Association announced that its members had voted to make the same change, also effective January 1.

officials did not deny the existence of forced labor. But they disputed parts of the story, especially The AP's assertion that police took bribes and turned a blind eye to the practices in the industry.

"This is not true," Sansern said without elaborating.

The AP stood by its report, part of a series of investigations into slavery in the fishing industry in the region. More than 2,000 trapped fishermen were freed last year from an island in Indonesia as a result of The AP's work. The reports also have led to a dozen arrests, millions of dollars worth of seizures, and proposals for new federal laws.

"We stand firmly behind our reporters' coverage, which has been scrupulous, thorough, and fair," said Paul Colford, an AP vice president and director of media relations. "Their stories exposing the enslavement of workers in the Southeast Asian fishing industry have been a source of great pride throughout The Associated Press."

The AP focused the story on a shrimp

shed southwest of Bangkok in Samut Sakhon, the heart of the country's shrimp-processing industry. The shed was raided in November after a worker escaped. But while several undocumented workers were detained, no one with the company was arrested on human-trafficking charges, and the shed reopened days later.

Police in Bangkok have since ordered local authorities to re-investigate the shed for human trafficking. Arrests have been made, the shed has been closed, and Samut Sakhon police have held a meeting to explain human-trafficking laws to shed owners.

The story noted that the government has recently passed laws to crack down on abusive employers, but also revealed gaps in those efforts, with some former slaves saying police sold them to agents to be trafficked again.

Sansern also took issue with The AP's statement that human trafficking "has helped turn Thailand into one of the world's biggest shrimp providers."

The AP report also pinpointed the case of

## The show must go on, unless North Korean divas say otherwise

By Eric Talmadge  
The Associated Press

**T**OKYO — Before it all fell apart, a visit to Beijing by North Korea's most popular all-female pop group was touted by Pyongyang as the perfect chance to warm up relations with its biggest and most important ally. Things haven't been going all that great lately and sometimes instead of taking the thorny issues head on, it's best to explore other options.

Like miniskirts and sequins.

But the much-anticipated international debut of the Moranbong Band at Beijing's National Theater last month was nixed just hours before it was to begin and the ladies hopped the first flight back to Pyongyang.

Though the deeper significance of it all is hard to gauge — neither country offered

any insight — the cancellation is particularly surprising because it was highly publicized, almost hyped, by North Korea's state-run media. The band had also recently done several performances that suggested it was being groomed for a broader push into the world spotlight.

Kim Jong Un's divas have become so popular with the North Korean people that it has long been seen as inevitable Pyongyang would turn them loose on the world stage. What better soft culture ambassadors could there be for as regime seen by many around the world as one of the most oppressive and brutal on the planet?

"Performances given by the all-female band are fresh and innovative in vocal and instrumental music, stage structure, and other aspects. Its singers are full of vim and vigor and they have strong personalities," said one report by the North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), which also



called the women a "national treasure."

Another KCNA report quoted a Chinese researcher as saying the tour proved that China and North Korea have made substantial progress in high-level cultural exchange. After quoting a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman saying the tour would benefit regional peace and stability, it went on to note media in South Korea, Japan, and Britain were sending out reports "drawing the attention of the world."

The Moranbong Band, which has about 20 members, has a lot going for them: sexy and yet wholesome looks, undeniable musical talent, unmatched popularity at home, and the blessing of North Korean leader Kim himself, who made turning them into his official pop icons one of his first pieces of business after assuming power in late 2011.

Their songs, nearly all of which are paeans to Kim, are played on virtually every flight into and out of the North on its

**BAND BAILS.** A member of the Moranbong Band of North Korea arrives at a hotel in Beijing, China. Before it all fell apart, a visit to Beijing by North Korea's popular all-female pop group formed by leader Kim Jong Un was touted by Pyongyang as the perfect chance to warm up relations with its biggest and most important ally. But the much-anticipated international debut of the Moranbong Band at Beijing's National Theater was nixed just hours before it was to begin and the ladies hopped the first flight back to Pyongyang. (Chinatopix via AP)

national airline. Women watch them for fashion tips, their tunes are karaoke staples, and their concerts — though rather infrequent — are broadcast over and over and over again on state-run television. They sing and dance and play electric guitars, keyboards, and drums in a fairly conventional pop ensemble, save for the electric violins.

During North Korea's elaborate October 11 ruling party foundation day anniversary celebrations, performances of the band were featured prominently and opened to the droves of foreign visitors and journalists allowed into the country for the event, even though such concerts had been extremely hard to get into previously.

China, despite some bumps recently, would have seemed like the safest place for their global debut. And for good measure, all three concerts were by invitation only.

The Moranbong Band's music may be seen by many North Korea watchers in the west, and its admittedly small overseas fan base, as kitschy and weird, but for many Chinese it represents a nostalgic throwback to days gone by, when patriotic hymns to hardworking peasants and factory workers toiling happily in the

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