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Activists call for witness protection as major Thai human trafficking trial begins

By Alisa Tang

BANGKOK (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Thai authorities must step up witness protection for a major human trafficking trial with the accused including an army general and one investigator fleeing the country fearing for his life, activists said on Thursday as the first witnesses gave evidence.

The case includes 88 defendants allegedly involved with lucrative smuggling gangs that were trafficking Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar, holding them for ransom in jungle camps before granting onward passage to Malaysia.

The investigation and arrests followed the grisly discovery in May of 30 bodies in a mass grave near a human trafficking camp close to the Thailand-Malaysia border.

Of 500 witnesses scheduled to testify, only 12 are receiving protection, while two have gone into hiding because of threats and others may follow suit, said Fortify Rights, a non-governmental organization advocacy group.

"Witnesses are key to ensuring justice is served in this case. Their security should be the utmost concern to the Thai authorities," Fortify Rights Executive Director Amy Smith said in a statement.

Prayuth Porsuttayarak, deputy director-general of the human trafficking office in the Attorney-General's Office, refuted the Fortify Rights' number of protected witnesses.

"I don't know where they got their numbers from. Eighty of the witnesses are victims, and they are foreigners, and they are under the protection of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security," Prayuth told Reuters by telephone.

He added that more than 200 witnesses are police officers, and the rest are investigators, bank office workers and "Thai people who do not need the protection program".

One Rohingya man, a longtime legal resident of Thailand, went into hiding after receiving threats, while Police Major General Praween Pongsirin, chief investigator on the case, went into exile and is seeking asylum in Australia.

"The fact that the top policeman investigating these cases fled Thailand because of a lack of protection afforded to him and his family shows just how poor government protection schemes have been," said Phil Robertson, deputy director for Human Rights Watch's Asia division.

Two prison buses brought the defendants to court on Thursday, including the army general and a suspected kingpin.

The defendants crowded into a seventh floor courtroom and heard testimony from two Bangladeshis who were held for two years in a trafficking camp in Songkhla, near the Malaysia border, said Prayuth of the attorney-general's office.

The court allowed journalists to observe the proceedings by video but barred them from reporting the witness testimony to prevent other witnesses from being influenced.

COMMITTED TO CRACKDOWN OR NOT?

A court official said last month that hearing testimony from the 500 witnesses could take up to two years.

Thailand has come under fire in recent years for the trafficking of migrants, many of them Rohingya Muslims from eastern Myanmar and Bangladesh facing religious and ethnic persecution. Some migrants faced torture and starvation in the jungle camps.

The country's reputation further suffered after reports of labor violations and slave labor in its huge seafood industry.

Despite the current crackdown and trial, the United States' annual Trafficking in Persons report kept Thailand for a second year on Tier 3 - the lowest tier - for failing to comply with the minimum U.S. standards for the elimination of trafficking.

"The Thai government needs to show its sincerity about prosecuting traffickers by seriously stepping up efforts to protect witnesses who will point fingers at the corrupt officials and Rohingya trafficking gangs," said Robertson.

(Reporting by Alisa Tang, Juarawee Kittisilpa and Panarat Thepgumpanat. Editing by Belinda Goldsmith; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, corruption and climate change. Visit www.trust.org)