

PRESS RELEASE
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Serious human rights violations at Natural Fruit factory

Pineapple processing company Natural Fruit is suspected of serious violations of basic human and labour rights.

According to the workers of a Natural Fruit factory in Prachuap Khiri Khan, Thailand, the company employs around 200 undocumented migrants from neighbouring Myanmar, including dozens of 14–17 year old children. About 700 of the factory's 800 employees are migrants.

Natural Fruit has confiscated migrant workers' passports and work permits, which prevents them from leaving or changing to another job. This is one sign of the type of conduct that may be characterised as trafficking in persons.

The findings, that are based on worker interviews done since October 2012, were published today by Finnwatch, a Finnish non-profit research organisation focusing on global corporate responsibility issues.

All workers interviewed for the report complained that their wages and overtime compensations were lower than required by Thai legislation. They are in practice forced to work overtime, sometimes in excess of the legally allowed 36 hours a week.

The workers said that Natural Fruit had informed them that it would not respect the new 300 baht minimum wage set by the Thai government at the beginning of 2013.

They also complained about random and unexplained pay deductions, violent behaviour by managers and poor and unsafe working conditions.

– These findings are extremely alarming. It is unusual that a company that is producing directly to the international market and has many high-profile customers is involved in such gross violations of fundamental rights, Henri Purje, research coordinator at Finnwatch, says.

One of the companies using Natural Fruit's pineapple concentrate is Refresco, a leading European soft drink and fruit juice maker whose clients reportedly include or have included Lidl, Aldi, Carrefour, Dia, Morrisons, Edeka, Rewe, Superunie, Ahold and Système U.

In 2011 Refresco was said to have the exclusive right to make PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Schweppes and Unilever products in a number of European markets.

Finnwatch also found problems in the responsibility of two tuna processing companies in the province of Samut Sakhon. Both companies, Thai Union Manufacturing and Unicord, are producers of major European retail chains' private label products and export all over the world.

– Basic wages at the tuna factories do not cover living expenses, some employees lack written contracts and workplace safety is insufficient. Underage children from Myanmar with false passports are also working at the factories, Purje describes.

The findings are in many ways consistent with previously reported violations at other food processing companies, such as Vita Food Factory.

– The Thai government must act with determination to ameliorate the situation of migrant labour. Recent news about improvements in the issuing of legal documents to irregular migrants may be a positive sign, Purje says.

Some of the problems raised by the Finnwatch research are politically extremely sensitive, as the United States is currently considering downgrading Thailand to Tier 3, an indication of serious concerns, in its Trafficking in Persons list.

Contact

Andy Hall

Migration expert who conducted the field research for Finnwatch
+66 84 611 9209
andyjhall1979@gmail.com

Henri Purje

Research coordinator, Finnwatch
+358 40 410 9710 (Finland)
henri.purje@finnwatch.org

A 12-page English summary of the report Halvalla on hintansa ("Cheap has a high price") as well as the full report in Finnish are available for free download at www.finnwatch.org as of 9 am CET (3 pm in Thailand) on 21 January.