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Book Review

Siroj Sorajjakool (2013), *Human Trafficking in Thailand: Current Issues, Trends and the Role of the Thai Government*

Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, ISBN: 978-616-215-060-9, 235 pages

Human trafficking is not widely reported in local Thai news, and news of it is often only picked up by international correspondents.

The extent of this problem has only started to reveal itself as a widespread problem in the kingdom. It usually goes something along these lines: An illegally trafficked migrant worker from Myanmar, Cambodia or Laos finds himself exploited inside and outside the workplace. In fact, his entire life revolves around his work:

> I worked almost 24 hours a day. I had to continuously fix fishing nets for three straight days. Very exhausted, my head flopped down to sleep. I was almost dead as well. The captain used a knife to slit my throat because I finished my lunch late. The blood flowed out and I knelt down begging for my life (Sombat, 21, trafficking victim, page 45).

This is among the many anecdotes in Siroj Sorajjakool's book, *Human Trafficking in Thailand: Current Issues, Trends, and the Role of the Thai Government*. These stories add a personal touch to a book that provides a comprehensive overview of government measures and trends across the decades on the topic of human trafficking.

As more victims open up about their experiences, a disturbing slew of facts has been revealed to mainstream media in recent years about beatings, trauma from witnessing violence – even murder – by employers, long working hours, sleep and nutritional deprivation, hazardous working and living conditions. Some die on the job, become ill, emaciated, emotionally disturbed or develop serious vitamin deficiencies; by the end of their ordeals, many are unable to hear, see or walk properly. Even if they manage to escape, they may be arrested, punished and deported at any time as illegal immigrants by either Thai or Malaysian authorities. Then there are stories of Thais being tricked into going abroad in search of jobs, only to suddenly find themselves in debt and working as slaves (some as sex slaves) in Malaysia, Japan, Bahrain, Australia, South Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong, England or the US, among other countries.

Nevertheless, even as policies, programmes, and legal mechanisms are being pushed, the business of trafficking continues to flourish. Some-

times the voices of the trafficked people themselves are neglected – they may not want to be trafficked, but if other channels of obtaining legal employment are not available, being trafficked is seen as the only way to get a job and income. What exactly is considered trafficking, why is it such an endemic problem and how flexible is the classification of "trafficked"? Throughout his book, Sorajjakool keeps these questions in mind as he seeks to answer these overarching queries: 1) Is sex trafficking the most common form of human trafficking in Thailand? 2) Are there still many children in the sex industry in Thailand? 3) What other forms of trafficking are there in Thailand? 4) What has the Thai government done to address this issue? 5) What are the areas that need improvement? 6) What are the underlying contributing factors of human trafficking in Thailand?

His methodology consists of interviewing sources from Thai government agencies (Ministry of Labour, Department of Social Development and Welfare, police stations), academic institutions (Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University), the United Nations in Thailand and various NGOs (for example, Garden of Hope, New Life Center Foundation, Night Light, Empower) on the latest developments in the effort to prevent trafficking and compensate victims.

The quality of research is exceptional – he draws from a comprehensive variety of sources throughout his book in order to present a balanced overview. He cites both Thai and foreign researchers, and publications from governmental (Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Statistical Office), non-governmental (Thai Royal Red Cross, Fair Trade Center) and international organisations (OSCE, UNESCO, ILO, UNODC, UNIAP, International Council on Human Rights Policy), as well as from academic publications (Chiang Mai University, Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, University of California Press, Australian National University) and non-academic ones, such as news reports.

A notable observation of the book is Sorajjakool's emphasis on human trafficking as a result of social stigma. It is not a clear-cut "objective reality", but a result of a socio-economic and political system that tends towards unequal distribution. In addition, cultural and social norms and taboos in Thailand passively condone human trafficking, allowing it to occur.

As of now, the problem persists in Thailand, a country which transformed itself from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing-based economy but along the way became a source, destination and transit country for trafficked men, women and children. The most common

sectors where these victims end up are maritime fishing, sexual slavery, seafood-processing, low-end garment production and domestic work.

Sorajjakool draws from three primary sources to define human trafficking. This implies that the Thai legal definition is not up to this standard. First, the UNIAP Human Trafficking Datasheets describe human trafficking as "a crime involving the cheating or deceiving of people into sexual servitude or labor for the purpose of their exploitation". The author also draws upon definitions from the *Trafficking in Persons* report, a summary put together by the US Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons that sorts countries into tiers according to their efforts to comply with the Trafficking Victims Protections Act. Recently, Thailand has been downgraded to Tier 3, sharing the same status as 22 other countries including North Korea, Syria and the Central African Republic. Not only will moral stigma be attached to products made in Thailand, the downgrade means Thailand could see the withdrawal of non-humanitarian US assistance, and opposition to funding from international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Sorajjakool also draws on information from the *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and from humantrafficking.org, a website started by the Asian Regional Initiative Against Trafficking (ARIAT) with the partnership of governments, NGOs and international organisations.

The book covers the treatment of trafficked Thai and non-Thai nationals. Nevertheless, Sorajjakool admits that the problem is more acute for foreign migrants, ethnic minorities and stateless people, who are more vulnerable to being trafficked than Thai nationals due to their impoverished economic status, low education level, language barriers and lack of understanding of their rights under Thai law.

Regarding statistics and figures cited in the book, Sorajjakool acknowledges that there are problems with their accuracy since the subjects of the book belong to the "hidden" informal sector of society, making it harder to solicit cooperation and reliable information from them. Nevertheless, it is an unspoken fact that trafficking in migrant labour is a well-developed industry in Thailand. He explains how it is large-scale to the point where employers often subcontract employment services to brokers assuming responsibility for registration, health insurance and work permits, which opens up the opportunity for corruption and extortion. Because there is a fine line in these industries of what is formal or informal work, victims cannot access the protective mechanisms that they need to escape and be compensated for their situation. And because of the endemic corruption at all levels, once victims escape their working

conditions, they sometimes find themselves exploited by officials as well. Corrupt police officers and immigration officers are known to protect brothels and food-processing facilities from raids and inspections.

Each sector of the economy and its problems with trafficking are chronicled in great depth in individual chapters. For example, there is a chapter on one of the biggest areas involving trafficking: the sex industry. Estimates from researchers and non-profit groups put the figure in the tens of thousands of trafficked victims ending up in tourist hubs like Bangkok and Chiang Mai, catering to both Thais and foreigners paying for illicit sex. Sometimes the victims are minors. But sex with prostitutes and minors is not a strong taboo in Asia, claims Sorajjakool. Widespread tolerance of this phenomenon allows trafficking to exist. The illicit nature of the industry means social protection is non-existent, and venereal diseases such as HIV are widespread in the industry. Social stigma against prostitution means that measures often target the prostitutes themselves, not the pimps or their clients.

He devotes different chapter to another industry with many trafficked victims, the fishing industry. In Thailand, the world's third-largest exporter of seafood, many migrants are trafficked to work on fishing boats for months on end, sometimes never seeing land for weeks, and are unable to leave because of the threats of financial penalties, violence or being reported to authorities.

Unlike other books on human trafficking, Sorajjakool makes a valuable observation: that trafficking is a symptom of a larger structural problem – namely, the hyper-capitalist, hyper-individualist global economy in relentless pursuit of free trade, competition, profit margins and the cheapest labour. There simply are very few incentives to comply with laws because the concerns of businesses trump concerns for human rights and human dignity. Cheap, commoditised labour provided by impoverished people means employers do not feel the need to provide any benefits, decent pay or social protection for employees. Sorajjakool writes how the liberalisation of trade since the 1980s has had a significant impact on the Thai economy, especially the reduction of tariffs, cancellation of import restrictions and elimination of agricultural internal support and export subsidies. This has made Thai farmers less competitive, as prices of commodities are driven up. Loan sharks take advantage of the situation by charging them high interest rates for credit that they must borrow. This is when brokers swoop into villages to take advantage of poverty and lack of opportunities. They entice and coerce farmers to sell their labour abroad through "agents" who then lure them into becoming trafficked workers. Amid the statements, the statistics and the

sad stories, it is easy to forget that human trafficking is not unavoidable – it stems from a system which allows human dignity to fall through the cracks in the pursuit of profit and competitiveness.

In order to alleviate the problem of trafficking and exploited labour, Sorajjakool insists, alternatives to this hyper-capitalist system be adopted. But he admits that despite all the suffering caused by this system, many of the trafficked still willingly become victims in order to find work and make a living. Commercial sex workers suffer from mistreatment and degradation, but are not necessarily trafficked. And not all recruiters are traffickers. Overall, he calls for a balance between satisfying the demands of the local economy in a global market and protecting workers' rights.

Written in an accessible and crisp style, the book offers a timely, all-encompassing look at the problem of human trafficking from many different angles. As of now, there are few books that are as comprehensive and up-to-date on the topic as this one.

However, by limiting its scope to what the Thai government can do, the book risks downplaying the efforts and cooperation of other entities such as NGOs and international organisations in the fight against human trafficking. And although he does mention the underlying social norms that are permissive of the mistreatment of workers, Sorajjakool does not explicitly mention the most damaging social stigma of all that allows human trafficking to occur – the bias of local Thais against migrant workers. Many middle- and upper-class Thais look down on migrant workers and workers in the informal sector of all types, despite benefitting from their labour and services. Once the workers are found, they are often repatriated as a matter of first instance, or locked in shelters that resemble prisons. There needs to be a campaign to change the negativity, resentment and prejudice of the Thai public towards migrants, trafficked persons and informal sector workers. It is not enough that the government, NGOs and international organisations work to tackle the problem. If living in a humane society is the goal of ordinary Thai citizens, they need to stop overlooking the problem when they see it and rescue victims, Thai or non-Thai, from such degrading and appalling conditions.

In addition, Sorajjakool fails to provide solutions or incentives to change the politicised nature of Thai society that allows human trafficking to exist. The ring of corruption that allows human trafficking to flourish involving the traffickers, the police, the military and the employers is known to the government, but it is admittedly not easy to disrupt the vested interests of these groups. But this ring must be broken somehow. Some aspects that could be further examined are the links between human trafficking and other forms of organised crime, the geographical

modus operandi of traffickers and other factors such as economic booms and busts, political instability and technology.

Future researchers on the topic could examine how the coming AEC (ASEAN Economic Community), set to be established in 2015, might affect trafficking trends in Thailand once the freedom of movement is liberalised in the region. There is no doubt that interstate mechanisms and increased public awareness are vital in curbing human trafficking in the region.

Overall, Sorajjakool's book is an invaluable source for those in search of an overview of human trafficking trends in Thailand. Those who read it are well poised to examine current and future trafficking phenomena, as the author provides excellent context. For example, Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority have been fleeing ethnic and religious violence in recent years and have been passing through neighbouring countries, including Thailand. They are among those most vulnerable to becoming the next major trafficked group. Sorajjakool would undoubtedly view this as part of a larger regional, structural problem stemming from a hyper-globalised, hyper-capitalist system, one which needs urgent reviewing if human rights are to be improved in Thailand and in Southeast Asia at large.

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