

International Trade Union Confederation

Spotlight Interview with Burmese migrant fishermen (Burma/Indonesia)



Abandoned/Runaway Burmese Migrant Fishermen

Brussels, 13 October 2008 (ITUC OnLine): According to trade union sources, there are an estimated 700 to 1,200 runaway Burmese migrant fishers on Indonesia's remote Tual Island, which lies 3,000-kilometres (1,875-miles) east of the country's capital, Jakarta. Illegally recruited into the Thai fishing fleet, along with tens of thousands of other undocumented Burmese working in the Thai fishing industry, the men have fled murder on the high seas and inhuman working conditions by jumping ship on Tual. Abandoned and near-forgotten, many of them survive by foraging and scratch-farming in Tual's forested interior. Three of the runaway fishermen are interviewed: Soe Min, aged 33, originally from Mandalay, Central Burma, who is now married to Tual Islander, Popi; Saing Winna, aged 45, an ethnic Chin, who lives alone in the forest and 34-year-old Tin Naing, who was born in the Burmese capital Yangon.

Could you describe the general situation of your fellow Burmese fishermen on Tual?

Soe Min: The Burmese here have got a lot of problems. Not small problems, big problems. Even today there are many people who've got trouble. They're missing Burma and facing a lot of hardship. I've seen people break down, laughing and crying, in front of me. It's the way they feel. I try to console them.

Saing Winna: We stay here because we've got no options. We don't want to stay in another country. Everyone wants to go back home.

Tin Naing: I try to keep my temper and be patient in these surroundings, because here I don't have any rights. If, for example, I have cigarettes and a local guy demands a smoke, I have to give it to them because this is their country. It's pretty degrading.

How did you survive when you first arrived here after jumping ship?

Soe Min: At first I couldn't speak the language. I knew only a few words to ask for food and directions. As long as we had jobs and money, local people took care of us. But when we had nothing, they ignored us. I just wandered around the place. Sometimes I even had to beg water from other people. I made a fire and dug up roots on a farm near where I was living. The local people warned me that they were poisonous and told me not to eat them., but I was so hungry that I ate them. I've faced so many difficulties here.

Why did you leave Burma?

Soe Min: I was forcibly recruited into the army, and I just couldn't take any more. Our officers were ordering us to massacre innocent civilians. Whenever we entered a village, you could say that village had a problem. There was fighting and shooting. The commander ordered us to kill every man in the village and burn it down. We had to follow his orders. Some people didn't know anything at all. They were only 15-year-old boys. We killed them all.

Can you tell me some of the horrors you experienced at sea?

Soe Min: Ever since we'd left Thailand, my friend had been seasick, and he was not familiar with the work. The Thai skipper didn't like him at all. My friend couldn't speak Thai, so he couldn't understand what the skipper told him. One day we were lifting the nets and a squid fell on the deck. The skipper told my friend to pick it up, but he didn't understand him. The water from the pipe was running around the deck and the squid was washed overboard. The skipper came down and hit him with a pipe. My friend raised his hand against the first blow, and his hand broke. Then the skipper hit him with the pipe a second time. The second blow smashed his shoulder blade. Then the skipper smashed him again on the back of his head. My friend fell to the deck. There were other Thai workers near him. The skipper dropped the pipe, washed his hands and went back up to the wheelhouse. He ordered his people to throw him into the water. We saw he was still alive. When he went back to the wheelhouse, the captain took the loudspeaker and warned everyone who was watching: "What are you looking at. Get back to work. If you want to end up like him, then behave like him!"

Do you see any other murders?

Soe Min: Yes. One day one of the Burmese crew was defecating over the side of the boat. While he was defecating, the other people reported it to the skipper. The

skipper came down, looked around, picked up a pipe then he hit him only one time. We saw he was hit. But didn't see exactly where he'd been hit. His body fell directly into the water. After that, whenever it was busy, everybody was terrified to shit or pee. Some people did it in their pants while they were working.

Saing Winna, how did you end upon Tual?

Saing Winna: I came from Kawthaung (Burma) and was sold by brokers in Ranong (Thailand). Since that time, I've worked as a fisherman. Throughout that time, brokers have passed me from one hand to another. We were sent to Bangkok. When we arrived in Bangkok, I didn't know where to go or what to do. There I met another Burmese guy from Thandwae. He asked me: "Brother, do you want to work on a boat?" I replied: "I came to work on a boat." So he knew I'd been sold in Mahachai.

Could you describe your experiences at sea?

Saing Winna: The problem was one of our young Burmese guys; a Thai cook beat him with an iron bar in front of my eyes. The skipper asked if the guy was dead or not. I told him: "He hasn't died yet, leave him alone, I'll look after him." The guy was hit at the back of his head and his brains spilled out. I grabbed him. He took an hour to die – the young guy took an hour to die. I think our Burmese boatman die like dogs and pigs. We can't go back to Burma, we have no contacts. When we have contacts, we don't have money. We've got a lot of difficulties back in Burma, so we can't go back.

How do you survive here?

Saing Winna: When the police and immigration come looking for us, we run and hide in the forest. We Burmese are always afraid of the police. Even when we're sleeping, we have to be alert. All the Burmese boatmen on the island, not just us, are suffering the same way. There are many of us here now. We've come to this island because of our difficulties. Everyone wants to be reunited with their families, but it's not as if we can walk back home even if we wanted to. It's like this: we left our country in the hope of making more money. Then when we arrived in another country, we realized our situation was worse than back home. We got just enough from work to feed ourselves. Sometimes we starved. But perhaps one day our dreams will come true?

Interview and pictures by David Browne

[See also Spotlight Interview with Htat Khoun \(AWU, Birmanie\) “Undocumented Burmese Migrant Woodworkers Are Exploited in the Thai Woodworking Industry”.](#)

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