

Thai kingdom & human trafficking; Senior army general among 88 defendants accused of trafficking victims

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Dozens of people arrested in Thailand's human trafficking crackdown, including a senior general, appeared in court Tuesday, days after the police officer in charge of the investigation tendered his resignation saying he feared for his life.

The kingdom has long been a major hub for human trafficking and people smuggling, with rights groups accusing officials of turning a blind eye to the grim trade - and even complicity in it.

Thailand's junta launched a belated crackdown in May, a move that uncovered death camps on the Thai-Malaysia border and led to dozens of arrests but also saw thousands of migrants abandoned on land and at sea by gang masters, eventually forcing a region-wide response.

In court Tuesday, a panel of seven judges detailed the charges against the group of suspects, some of whom spoke Rohingya and Malay dialects as well as Thai.

One judge said all 88 defendants were accused of trafficking victims between January 2011 and May 2015.

"All 88 defendants together let victims starve, denied health treatments for sick victims and hid bodies on the mountain [camps] where they died," she said.

Among those who appeared at the procedural hearing in court was senior army general Manas Kongpan who is charged with being a linchpin of the trade.

At least four other military officers have been implicated, two of whom have yet to be arrested. Local politicians, officials and business figures are also among those charged.

Manas's lawyer said his client was innocent.

"We deny all the charges and I have prepared a dozen witnesses in this case," attorney Noppachai Veratanya told reporters at the court.

The crackdown came after Thailand was embarrassingly downgraded by Washington in 2014 to the lowest category of an annual State Department report that evaluates countries' willingness to tackle human trafficking.

Thailand's junta has trumpeted the recent arrests as proof that the kingdom will no longer tolerate the trade and pursue complicit officials no matter how powerful they are.

However, the junta's rhetoric has been thrown into doubt by the senior police officer who led the

trafficking investigation.

In an interview last month, Major General Paween Pongsirin said his investigation was closed too quickly, with many suspects still at liberty and his unit disbanded.

He also said he feared for his life after implicating senior military figures in the grisly, multimillion-dollar trade.

Over the weekend he handed in his resignation after superiors ordered him to take up a new post in Thailand's deep south, an insurgency-plagued region where the army effectively controls security.

Thailand has long been a hub for the trafficking of persecuted Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, who in recent years have been joined by Bangladeshi economic migrants.

Many were held against their will in camps or on boats until relatives paid exorbitant ransoms.

Survivors have testified that beatings, starvation, murder and rape was commonplace. Dozens of graves were found in jungle camps earlier this year.

With the monsoon ending, rights groups warn that boats are likely to set sail in the coming weeks.

Thailand has remained on the bottom tier of the State Department's trafficking list for a second year in a row, alongside nations like Iran, Libya, North Korea and Syria.

Agence France-Presse in Bangkok

P.S.

* "Thai military general, the alleged 'lynchpin' in human trafficking, among 88 charged in junta-led crackdown". South China Morning Post. PUBLISHED : Tuesday, 10 November, 2015, 5:40pm.

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