



## Global

# Canada is behind on fighting modern slavery

A Senate public bill would help Canadian consumers have more confidence in the products they purchase by encouraging corporations to take actions that will reduce the risk of slavery being in their supply chains.

BY ANDREY SAWCHENKO

Fifty million people are now estimated to be enslaved around the world and Canada's law makers need to recognize the country has fallen behind in the fight to end modern slavery.

On Sept. 12, the United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) released its first modern slavery estimate report since 2016, stating that numbers have risen by nearly 10 million, from 40 million to 50 million people estimated to be enslaved on a given day, of which 28 million are attributed to forced labour.

Many Canadians are all too aware that forced labour is commonly found deep in the supply chains of products that are a part of their everyday lives. Recent reports highlight forced labour on fishing vessels, on palm oil plantations, and even in factories



Bill S-211, Fighting Against Forced Labour and Child Labour in Supply Chains Act, is being studied by the House Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

producing medical gloves. Zooming in closer, we can see that the supply chains of these products run through jurisdictions around the world where modern slavery is common because workers are vulnerable to exploitation and worker protection laws are not consistently enforced.

The International Justice Mission (IJM) teams I work with collaborate with governments in Southeast Asia and local partners to support survivors, increase enforcement of laws, and improve national systems that protect workers.

In a 2016 study of migrant fishing workers in Thailand, only 13 per cent reported fair labour conditions, while 76 per cent had been in debt bondage and 38 per cent had been trafficked. Aung, a 16-year-old from Myanmar who was rescued by authorities from forced labour on a fishing raft last year, said, "I was forced to work more than 12 hours daily

and did not receive any wages. I got only two hours of sleep even when I felt tired or sick. I felt scared that I might not have the chance to see my family again."

### Canadian anti-slavery bill is a step forward

There is an encouraging development, however. Parliament is considering a bill that would help Canadian consumers have more confidence in the products they purchase by encouraging corporations to take actions that will reduce the risk of slavery being in their supply chains. Bill S-211 would seek to accomplish this by requiring Canadian entities to report on the potential risk of forced labour in their supply chains and what efforts they are taking to address those risks. IJM Canada recognizes the work to date of International Development Minister Harjit Sajjan,

International Trade Minister Mary Ng, MPs John McKay and Arnold Viersen, Senator Julie Miville-Dechéne, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group to End Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.

The result of the bill would be increased transparency regarding the anti-slavery efforts of government and businesses as they procure their own goods, ingredients, and materials. Similar legislation has provided a helpful increase in public data in California, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other jurisdictions.

Importantly, the bill also clarifies that any goods produced in whole or in part by forced labour or child labour may not be imported to Canada. Along with passing Bill S-211, the government must include funding and resources to support enforcement by the Canada Border Services Agency.



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### **Criminals prey on the vulnerable and undermine best efforts**

Responsible Canadian corporations are already digging deep into their supply chains to map where their raw materials and component parts come from, and to improve conditions for workers. But, unfortunately, we at IJM have seen firsthand that criminals regularly undermine responsible business efforts to clean up supply chains. They prey on the most vulnerable: migrant workers and those in poverty, many of whom are even more desperate after the economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Criminals capitalize on those who are vulnerable because slavery crimes are profitable and because enforcement of laws against forced labour in many countries is weak, especially where cross-border law enforcement co-ordination is required.

These factors explain why there are still an estimated 17 million workers enslaved in private economy around the world. And it's how Dom, a Cambodian man who migrated to work

in Thailand on the promise of decent work, was enslaved for more than six years on a series of fishing boats across Southeast Asia, only to finally make it home and discover that his son had also been trafficked into slavery on boats controlled by the same network of criminals.

### **When laws are enforced for workers, forced labour crimes reduce**

Of course, what is most helpful for those in forced labour today is protection by the local authorities where they are enslaved. What Dom needed every day of those six hellish years was rescue, and for authorities to stop the trafficking network that was exploiting him, and then his son, for forced labour at sea.

Now, however, protection for others in Dom's community is building. Cambodian and Thai authorities have been working for the past five years to prosecute traffickers on both sides of the border based on courageous testimonies from other survivors; this has been done in collaboration with my IJM col-

leagues under a project supported by the Walmart Foundation.

These combined efforts have already secured a total of 19 convictions to date and shut down a network that had trafficked hundreds, if not thousands, of men over a decade.

What IJM teams have found in combatting modern slavery crimes for 25 years is that when criminals see their nation's laws consistently enforced at the local level, most choose to stop. Even relatively small increases in detection and prosecution can result in a disproportionately large impact on reducing crime. For example, in projects I was a part of, just three to five years of consistent law enforcement resulted in reductions in child sex trafficking by 72-85 per cent in the three biggest sex trafficking hotspots in the Philippines.

### **Government can encourage raising the level of worker protection across the board**

Global businesses generally want to purchase from markets

where they know there is a low risk of forced labour, including buying from suppliers who treat their workers fairly under local laws. This will become even more true when a greater number of import laws in buying countries include forced labour restrictions.

In light of the ILO's new report, governments and businesses must find a new urgency. In the last five years, while Canada has considered different versions of this legislation, 10 million more people have fell prey to modern slavery, like Dom and his son. How much longer must we wait to take action?

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