

latimes.com

Federal grand jury indicts associates of Beverly Hills firm in human-trafficking case

In a 'mind-boggling case,' the owner and four employees of Global Horizons Manpower Inc. are indicted on charges of engaging in a conspiracy to coerce the labor of hundreds of Thai nationals.

By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times

September 4, 2010

In 2003, a farmworker showed up in the Hollywood offices of a Thai community organization with a harrowing tale.

The Thai national described being lured to the United States with promises of a three-year contract and \$1,900 in monthly pay to harvest pineapples in Maui — nearly twice as much as the average annual income in Thailand for most impoverished workers like himself.

Instead, he alleged, associates of a Beverly Hills labor recruiting firm forced him and fellow Thai farmworkers into virtual slave labor with substandard wages, inadequate food and housing and threats of deportation and physical violence if they tried to escape.

Now, in what authorities call the largest human-trafficking case in U.S. history, a federal grand jury in Honolulu this week indicted the owner and four employees of Global Horizons Manpower Inc., along with two Thai labor recruiters, on charges of engaging in a conspiracy to coerce the labor of those workers and about 400 other Thai nationals.

"The case is mind-boggling," said Chanchanit Martorell, executive director of the Thai Community Development Center, which has worked on the case for seven years and played a pivotal role in half a dozen other human-trafficking cases involving Thai workers. "It is by far the largest and most protracted case we've ever worked on."

Global Horizons President Mordechai Orian, an Israeli national, turned himself in to the FBI on Friday in Honolulu and was to appear in court that afternoon. All other defendants have been arrested or accounted for, according to FBI spokesman Tom Simon in Honolulu.

A receptionist answering the phone at Global Horizons said no one was available for comment. The company's website said its labor contracting network spanned 15 countries and recruited workers on four continents from such countries as Thailand, India, Nepal and Israel, as well as from Eastern and Western Europe.

The indictment alleges that Orian and his associates conspired to lure the victims here from May

2004 to September 2005 to work on farms across the country under a federal agricultural guest worker program. The indictment alleges the workers were lured with false promises of lucrative jobs, kept in line with threats of serious economic harm and charged recruitment fees as high as \$21,000, which were financed by debts secured with family property in Thailand.

After arriving in the United States, the indictment alleges, the defendants confiscated the workers' passports.

Named in the indictment are Orian, Pranee Tubchumpol, Shane Germann and Sam Wongsesanit, all of Global Horizons Manpower. Thai labor recruiters Ratawan Chunharutai and Podjanee Sinchai were also charged with engaging in conspiracy to commit forced labor, the FBI said.

If convicted, Orian and Tubchumpol each face maximum prison sentences of 70 years.

Although the indictment alleges about 400 victims, Martorell said more than 1,100 agricultural worker visas were issued to Global Horizons for Thai laborers. To aid the workers, the center has so far secured hundreds of T visas, which give trafficking victims who cooperate with law enforcement a temporary visa that can lead to a green card.

Martorell said the case illustrates the changing face of forced labor. The Thai center's most famous slave labor case involved 72 workers illegally smuggled into the United States, forcibly confined at an El Monte sweatshop and rescued in a dramatic predawn raid by state and federal agents in 1995. But the Global Horizon case, and other recent ones she has handled, involve workers legally brought into the United States under the H-2A foreign agricultural worker program.

"On the surface, it looks like the workers were legally contracted," she said. "But on closer inspection, it's slavery. Their passports were confiscated ... and threats were made if any of them dared to try to escape. The guest worker program can be legalized slavery if you don't constantly monitor it."

Martorell said the workers were brought to farms throughout the United States, including ones in Washington, Hawaii, Florida, Colorado, Utah, Virginia, the Carolinas, the Dakotas, Kentucky, New York and California. Workers were housed in flophouses with no running water or electricity, she said. Some had to survive eating leaves from plants in Hawaii or by river fishing in Florida.

The Thai center is also pursuing civil charges against Global Horizons through the U.S. Labor Department and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Martorell said.

"It's been so long, but we've persisted and we've fought and we've finally achieved a major, major victory," she said.