

STATEMENT 1st of April 2013

Legal actions against Finnwatch researcher are an attack against human rights defenders and freedom of expression

Thailand's authorities must immediately launch an investigation into the operations of Natural Fruit and its parent company NatGroup. Human rights issues must be tackled also in the ongoing free trade agreement negotiations between Thailand and the EU.

Natural Fruit, a maker of tinned pineapple and juice concentrate, has submitted two lawsuits in Thailand against Andy Hall, the migration expert who recently coordinated Finnwatch's field research in Thailand.

If found guilty, Mr Hall could face seven years in prison. Natural Fruit is also demanding seven million euros for damages.

The accusations relate to research commissioned by Finnwatch and conducted by Mr Hall in October-November 2012 and the communication of its results to the public.

The most alarming findings were based on interviews with Natural Fruit's employees. The workers, some of whom were undocumented migrants, reported poor working conditions, unlawfully low wages, confiscation of official documents, use of child labour and excessive overtime. Interviews were documented and can be verified.

Finnwatch communicated the findings to relevant Thai ministries in December 2012. Natural Fruit was also contacted repeatedly during the research process. The company did not respond in any way or display any interest to comment on our findings.

Despite strong evidence indicating serious wrongdoings, Natural Fruit or its parent company NatGroup have not been held accountable and are allowed to continue their operations.

Our understanding is that the lawsuits filed against Andy Hall are not only unfounded but also a part of a wider attempt to limit the activities of human rights defenders and the freedom of expression in Thailand.

In recent months alone, several situations have been reported in which the fundamental human and labour rights of workers in Thailand's key export industries, such as shrimp, tuna and pineapple processing, have been grossly violated. Thai authorities' responses have in many cases been inadequate and ineffective.

Thailand recently finalised lengthy negotiations on a partnership cooperation agreement with the European Union, its third largest trading partner. According to José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, respect for human rights and the fight against corruption are essential elements of the agreement. In March, the EU and Thailand launched negotiations for a bilateral free trade

agreement.

It is important that the EU, in the context of the ongoing negotiations as well as in its other interactions with Thailand, raises the above-mentioned human rights issues and uses all the means in its power to encourage Thailand to respect human rights and the freedom of expression.

Thailand must step up its efforts to protect human rights defenders and to ensure that organisations, researchers, activists and journalists promoting human rights may carry out their work free of harassment.

All legal actions against Andy Hall must be dropped, and Thailand's authorities must immediately launch an investigation into NatGroup's operations.

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