The horrors of modern slave trade

CRIMINAL STRUCTURES
Bangladeshi journalist uncovers human trafficking network

Stefan Osario-König

Next time you go to a fancy restaurant, consider that the shrimps on your plate might have been produced by chained up and beaten slaves from South Asia. Bangladeshi journalist Emran Hossain went on an undercover mission and discovered the horrors of human trafficking.

The story began in October 2014 when reports appeared in Bangladeshi newspapers about kidnapings that had occurred in the coastal region. It soon became obvious that some sort of human trafficking was going on, but what was really happening remained unclear.

Bangladesh is a poor country with an estimated GDP per capita of just above 1.300 US dollars per year. Hence many workers used to migrate to countries in the region in order to make a living. However, "it has become very difficult to travel to Malaysia, Thailand or Singapore for work", says Mr Hossain.

It is precisely this growingly difficult situation that brought human traffickers onto the scene. "They tell parents that they do not have to pay any money for their sons so that they could travel", says Mr Hossain.

The only thing they would be asking for is the fare for the ferry from the coastal regions to the port of Teknaf in the far south-east of Bangladesh. "They tell the parents that they would have to pay only 200 taka by the families of the victims", says Mr Hossain.

The Cox's Bazar is a coastal district in Southeast Bangladesh, near the border to Burma, and its sandy beach is about 150 km long. There the victims have to climb into small fisher boats that can take up to 50 or 60 people. "These boats are very small", says Mr Hossain.

Then the overloaded boats make their way in the dark to a larger cargo ship waiting about 100autical miles away from the coast. Those ships can take up to 1.000 or 2.000 people. It takes approximately one or two weeks to fill it completely. Then it starts its journey to Thailand.

"Thailand consists of many islands. The people are taken there into so-called holding places in the forest," explains Mr Hossain.

These places are areas where a big tent is set up and in which the immigrants are kept in prisoners. But the real horror begins here. "The victims are beaten and many women are being raped while their families have to listen over the phone", reports Mr Hossain.

Furthermore Mr Hossain says: "These criminal activities have been going on since 2000 at least and some people even died as a result of the torture."

But they didn't attract much attention until March this year, when Emran Hossain published the results of his six-month investigation. The first human trafficking victims were the Rohingya people, a Muslim minority from Myanmar. "When there were no Rohingya left, they started taking Bangladeshis", explains Mr Hossain.

"And one has to consider that 90 percent of the Thai shrimp industry depends on slave labour."

Once the abductors have received the payment consisting of 200.000 taka by the families of the victims, the latter are brought from Thailand to Malaysia by land. Mr Hossain's investigation also revealed that the border guards were involved in the trafficking. The journalist explains: "Once the people are inside Malaysia, what happens to them is simply a matter of luck. If the police catches them, they are being taken to a detention centre, which they are normally released from after a few days. But if they are caught by the human traffickers, they are tortured for money again."

Thanks to Mr Hossain's investigation many future victims might be avoided. A Thai general has been arrested for his involvement in the Bangladesh human trafficking. Another one is searching for yet many details about the case itself remain unclear.

"Who were the high-ranking officials benefiting financially? Did the local police officers turn their heads away in exchange for money?"

"At the so-called 'Malaysia airport' in Teknaf, in the far South-east of Bangladesh, you can find those fisher boats used for the transport of the victims", says Mr Hossain.

"The local police was informed about it and ignored it. Apparently there was an exchange of money for that kind of favour."

"The village gave a cunning and sinister impression."

The topic of crisis reporting is being discussed at the 10th ASEF journalists’ colloquium, which takes place in Luxemburg this week.

ASEF-Gipfel