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Sweatshop Instead of Paradise

Thais Lived in Fear as Slaves at L.A. Garment Factories

By William Branigin
Washington Post Staff Writer

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LOS ANGELES—Three years ago, Sawieng Singasathit was a 38-year-old widow struggling to support two teenage daughters on the \$320 a month she earned at a Bangkok garment factory. Then a friend said she knew a man offering jobs in Los Angeles at up to five times that amount and suggested that they both apply.

"Are you sure it's not hell?" Sawieng recalls asking her friend, nicknamed "Boo."

"Of course not," she says Boo replied. "How could there be any hell in L.A.? It's paradise. L.A. is the city of angels."

But when they got here, Sawieng says, "we just huddled up and cried."

Instead of paradise, the Thai seamstress, now 41, found herself in indentured servitude, confined to what authorities here have described as a virtual "slave labor camp" in a town house complex a few miles east of the gleaming high-rises of downtown Los Angeles. There she routinely toiled 17 hours a day to pay off a \$5,000 "debt"—the price of her passage and falsified travel documents—by sewing women's and children's apparel at piecework rates amounting to as little as 60 cents an hour.

If she tried to escape, Sawieng says the Thai owners of the illegal sweatshop warned her, they would retaliate against her family in Thailand and burn down her house. She still recalls the even more chilling threat of the

man who recruited her: "A bullet is very cheap."

Today Sawieng is one of 72 Thai workers designated as material witnesses following an Aug. 2 raid that freed them from the seven-town house compound in El Monte, a municipality of 110,000 people that forms part of greater Los Angeles.

The raid resulted in the arrest of eight Thais alleged to be owners and operators of the clandestine sweatshop, which apparently started up in 1988 and supplied millions of dollars worth of clothing through front companies to manufacturers and retailers all over the United States.

The case has spotlighted the sordid underside of America's \$86 billion garment industry and spurred calls for a crackdown on what officials say are its widespread violations of labor laws.

"We have now uncovered outright slavery here in the United States in this industry," said Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich. He said he prays that such conditions are rare, "but I fear that there are many other El Montes waiting to be exposed."

The case has set off recriminations among state and federal agencies over why the sweatshop was allowed to continue operating for more than three years after it was first discovered. And it has become the subject of political finger-pointing between Republicans and Democrats over illegal immigration, budget cuts and law enforcement.

Manufacturers and retailers who bought the sweatshop's clothing have expressed shock over its methods, only to be accused of hypocrisy by union leaders who hold these businesses responsible for driving down wages and working conditions in the industry generally.

California surpassed New York a few years ago as the country's leading apparel producer. Now an estimated 5,000 legal and 1,000 illegal factories have helped make the garment industry the second largest manufacturing sector in California and the fastest-growing one in this vast metropolis.

Faced with stiff competition from imports, the industry has grown here in part because of abundant and cheap immigrant labor.

The vast majority of California's estimated 140,000 garment workers are Latino and Asian immigrants, industry studies show. More than 80 percent of them are women, and thousands are illegal aliens. According to federal and state officials, social workers and union leaders, legal and undocumented workers, alike are commonly exploited by employers who shortchange them on wages and avoid billions of dollars in state and federal taxes.

A 1994 survey by the U.S. and California Labor departments found that even among the state's legal garment firms, half paid less than the minimum wage, 68 percent did not pay overtime, 72 percent failed to keep adequate records and 93 percent violated health and safety regulations.

"An epidemic of exploitation is spreading through our neighborhoods and is sapping the economic strength and vitality from the roots of California's financial future," said state Sen. Hilda L. Solis (D), who represents El Monte.

The El Monte operation was part of what federal officials describe as a garment industry "food chain" headed by huge retailers. To cut costs and keep up with fast-changing styles, particularly in women's fashions, the stores have capitalized on "information age" technology.

Bar codes on merchandise allow retailers to collect information instantly on sales and quickly place orders. The practice allows the retailer to display a wide variety of items, reduce inventory costs and avoid close-out sales. And it has helped domestic manufacturers compete with cheaper foreign products.

But the manufacturers come under pressure to deliver quickly, and they often subcontract the work to sewing and cutting shops. The more than 22,000 of these shops nationwide compete fiercely for the manufacturers' business and employ the bulk of the country's nearly 1 million garment workers. Typically paid on a piece rate basis, these workers are at the bottom of the chain.

For them, the fast production requirements, retailers' cost-cutting and job competition from illegal immigrants have led to sweatshop conditions that a 1994 General Accounting Office report says differ little from those at the turn of the century.

After profits are taken out at every level, said Rolene Otero, a Los Angeles-based official of the U.S. Labor Department, the price a consumer pays for a garment bears little relationship to its labor cost.

"Manufacturers create, maintain and control this system of exploitation and then cry crocodile tears when the suffering becomes known to the public," the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees charged last month. "This is the dirty secret of the industry."

From the beginning, investigations of the El Monte operation seemed to have been marked by false starts and foul-ups.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service has acknowledged that it first learned of the sweatshop when someone who claimed to have escaped from it called the Los Angeles Police Department anonymously in March 1992 and

said 45 workers were being held there against their will. The INS investigated, but the U.S. Attorney's office said there was insufficient "probable cause" for a criminal search warrant, and the inquiry was closed.

It was reopened in May of this year when another escapee, a seamstress, told the INS of alien smuggling and sweatshop operations at the site. Her information was judged to be "dated," however, and the U.S. Attorney's office again refused to seek a criminal search warrant.

El Monte building inspectors also visited the complex at least five times, but the sweatshop continued to operate.

In July, the state Labor Department began its own investigation, obtained a civil search warrant and asked the immigration service to join a multiagency raid set for Aug. 2. After participating in planning for the raid, the INS tried to postpone it at the last minute, then withdrew its three dozen agents and Thai interpreters on grounds that going in under a state warrant would jeopardize a criminal case.

As state and local authorities began raiding the El Monte site and two suspected front businesses, one of the alleged principals walked away after telling agents he had to go to the bathroom.

Federal immigration officers showed up a couple of hours later and arrested everyone, including the 67 women and five men who had been confined to the El Monte compound as sweatshop workers. They were taken to an INS detention facility and at one point were transported in shackles, but they eventually were freed on \$500 bond each.

The INS, meanwhile, raided three more sweatshops Aug. 23—this time

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9-12-95

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THE WASHINGTON POST

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1995

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Officials Call for Crackdown On Garment Work Conditions

INDUSTRY SUMMIT

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using civil warrants—and arrested 55 persons, including 39 Thai workers. The Thais were not confined against their will as in El Monte, but were apparently paying off similar alien-smuggling debts, immigration officials said.

Among those arrested was a woman who escaped from the El Monte sweatshop in 1992 and sought work in better conditions. She is now being held as an illegal alien.

So far, the El Monte case has produced indictments against nine Thais, including the alleged recruiter, Sukit Manasurangkul, who reportedly flew back to Thailand a week before the raid. Currently being held without bail are Sukit's 65-year-old mother, Sume Manasurangkul, two of his brothers, the brothers' wives and three men identified as guards.

The five-count indictment charges the nine with conspiracy to violate federal laws and with transporting, harboring and employing illegal aliens, offenses that carry maximum total penalties of more than 20 years in prison and \$1 million in fines. Other possible charges, including peonage and involuntary servitude, are under consideration.

In addition, the federal and state Labor departments are suing the defendants on behalf of their former employees for \$5 million in back wages, \$5 million in damages and \$1.6 million in penalties.

All nine have pleaded not guilty to the criminal charges. Although investigators found cash, gold, jewelry and sewing equipment worth nearly \$950,000 at the site and traced wire transfers to Bangkok totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars a month, the defendants claimed indigence and chose to be defended by court-appointed attorneys.

One key potential witness is Ruengthiwa Hongarai, who arrived at the sweatshop in February 1991 and escaped two years later. She was recruited in Bangkok and obtained a tourist visa from the U.S. Embassy there after a marriage of convenience to one of her cousins to help convince consular officials that she planned to return to Thailand, she said in a telephone interview.

Once she started working at El Monte, however, the low pay and harsh regime soon filled her with disillusionment, resentment and a growing sense of desperation. After consulting a Thai-English dictionary, she wrote "Help Me" on a piece of paper and threw it over a fence into an adjacent trailer park, Ruengthiwa said. From a window, she watched an old man pick up the note, read it, then silently walk away.

Sometimes, she said, the workers were allowed to buy ice cream from a vendor who came by the front gate, but he man spoke only Spanish, and the Thais could not communicate with him. All they could do was buy ice cream from him, she said.

She managed to pay off her "debt" in about 18 months and asked to go home, but the owners told her she had to finish her unwritten three-year "contract," Ruengthiwa said. Her health deteriorated, and she lost about 40 pounds.

Then, one afternoon in early 1993, she saw her chance. A guard complained of a headache, and she gave him some sinus medicine that she knew would make him drowsy. As he dozed off, she guzzled a Budweiser to give her courage, then scaled the 10-foot wall behind the town houses, gashing her leg on the barbed wire.

She sought asylum at a Thai Buddhist temple in North Hollywood and eventually moved to New England. There she met an American engineering recruiter, whom she married in March. Now 29, Ruengthiwa plans to testify in the upcoming trial of her former employers.

The stories of other workers do not have such happy endings.

"I thought about trying to escape, but I never had the courage to carry it out," said a 30-year-old seamstress who gave her name only as Sunan.

"I was scared because there were a lot of threats," added a companion, Boonsom, 24.

Both said they never left the sweatshop compound during the entire time they worked there.

Ramduan Seesing, 42, a stout, round-faced woman from the poor northeastern part of Thailand, said she came to El Monte in August 1992 in hopes of earning money to support her twin sons but only managed to pay off her "debt" just before the raid. The incessant sewing gave her headaches and impaired her vision, she said.

Her friend, Sawieng, who came to El Monte at the same time, worried about the teenage daughters she left behind in a house in Prachinburi Province north-east of Bangkok. Her mother had died less than a month before her departure, Sawieng said, and she was able to send back only about \$100 a month. She fretted that her mother's ghost would give her daughters trouble, and she despaired that after her debt repayments, living expenses and remittances, she was not saving any money.

But perhaps the most devastating blow for Sawieng occurred early in her stay at El Monte. Her best friend, Hong, the one who had urged her to go to Los Angeles, joined another seamstress in an escape and vanished without a word.

"She didn't tell me anything," Sawieng said. "She just disappeared." Sawieng decided she had no choice but to finish her three-year "contract," then ask her bosses for permission to return to Thailand.

As she spoke of her ordeal, of her worries about providing for her daughters and of her abandonment by her close friend, the pain of it all seemed to overwhelm Sawieng. Her eyes reddened, and tears began rolling down her cheeks.

"We used to see police cars pass by and wonder, 'When are they going to come and help us?'" Sawieng recalled, dabbing at her eyes with her loose white T-shirt. "But nobody ever paid any attention to us."

Now, she said, she just wants to go home.

Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich, who says he was horrified by conditions at the El Monte sweatshop, has called a summit of some of the nation's largest clothing retailers to devise ways to clean up the garment industry.

Scheduled for Tuesday in New York, the meeting is aimed at enlisting some of the country's biggest department stores, which have "substantial bargaining leverage in the garment food chain," in an effort to protect the industry, workers and consumers from abusive contractors, Reich said.

Invites include Hecht's, Bloomingdale's and Disney, which were among the retail giants found to have sold clothes made in the El Monte sweatshop or in three other illegal factories raided in Los Angeles last month.

THE SWEATSHOP TO RETAILER 'FOOD CHAIN':



THE RETAILER

The Labor Department found that these retailers stocked clothing sewn by the El Monte operation:

Foley's Pacific

Hecht's

Dayton Hudson

Specialty Retailers Inc.

Venture and Lerner

Macys

Flare's

Mervyn's

Montgomery Ward

J.C. Penney

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THE MANUFACTURER

Some manufacturers, which provide clothing to retailers and city shippers or wholesalers that subcontract the actual manufacture—cutting and sewing—to firms like D&R Fashions.

The Labor Department found these firms sold El Monte's clothing to the retailers:

F40 California Inc.

Balmora Inc.

Paragraff Clothing Co.

B.U.M. International

Tomato Inc.

New Boy Inc./Voltage Inc.

Berino Enterprises

Diane Samandi (Jonquil label)

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THE SWEATSHOP

D&R Fashions did the cutting and sewing for the manufacturers. At one time legally registered, D&R was a Los Angeles garment-making shop that served as a front for the El Monte sweatshop, where most of the work actually was done.

THE WASHINGTON POST

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1995

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The Washington Times
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1995

U.N. auditor finds no fiscal oversight

Stunned by waste, other deficiencies

By Refet Kaplan
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The United Nations' top auditor acknowledges he was "surprised" at the extent of the financial supervision at the multibillion-dollar organization he joined 10 months ago.

That's because there didn't seem to be any.

"The United Nations had existed for almost 50 years without effective internal oversight," says Karl Paschke, who took the newly created position of inspector general in November 1994 at the insistence of the United States.

"I think that [historical lack of oversight] is part of the problem," Mr. Paschke said in a recent interview with reporters and editors at The Washington Times. "There is waste, there are awkward procedures, and the management culture, to put it in a phrase, is deficient."

Mr. Paschke and his staff of roughly 100 face a rather daunting task: to start cleaning up the internal financial operations of the United Nations or risk losing the contributions of the United States, which is assessed 25 percent of the regular U.N. budget and an even larger percentage of peacekeeping costs.

He appears to have the right qualifications for the job.

As director-general for personnel and management of the German Foreign Ministry from 1990-1994, he was responsible for dismantling the former East German foreign service during the reunification of Germany. Those credentials should well serve a man charged with investigating what critics say is an equally Byzantine operation.

Mr. Paschke, whose formal title is undersecretary-general for in-



Photo by Bert V. Gould/The Washington Times

U.N. inspector general Karl Paschke says, "There is waste, there are awkward procedures, and the management culture . . . is deficient."

ternal oversight services, notes he does not have the executive power to change policy. What he can do, however, is "control, oversee, audit, evaluate, monitor, inspect, and give management advice and make recommendations."

He will be closely watched in his five-year, nonrenewable term, particularly by Republicans in Congress who don't believe the United States is getting its money's worth at the United Nations.

Mr. Paschke seems aware of the pressure but not intimidated by it. And while he prepares to issue his first annual report, he said he has identified three key areas that are in most urgent need of closer oversight:

- Peacekeeping operations, an increasingly large chunk of U.N. expenditures.

These operations, which could cost more than \$3 billion this year, is "where internal controls are not always readily observed, and where managers think they can cut corners."

- Humanitarian operations in

places like Rwanda, where, like peacekeeping, "a lot of money is involved."

Also like peacekeeping, these humanitarian operations are usually in high-risk areas where the chances of fraud and abuse are greater

- The "entire area" of procurement.

"If rules and regulations and not observed . . . where money is involved, you always have the chance for things to go wrong," he said.

But Mr. Paschke's strategy in controlling these programs may disappoint those in Congress who are looking for a quick fix.

"I believe very strongly that we are going to be more effective addressing the little issues," according to Mr. Paschke.

"What the Congress expected me to do was to come into office on November 15th and kick out the first people in the street, close the first two departments and shut down the first two agencies . . . by the 16th. I'm somewhat frustrated when I see these expectations."

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Fears Growing Over Bacteria Resistant To Antibiotics

By MARC LIPSITCH

THERE have long been warnings that bacteria were acquiring resistance to a wider and wider range of antibiotics. But new antibiotics were always being developed, and in the race between bacterial evolution and human ingenuity, technology appeared to be winning.

Now, the bacteria are catching up, and many scientists and public health officials fear that the evolution of resistant strains may soon outpace the development of new drugs, leaving doctors powerless to treat infections that were once routine.

This is already the case for an important family of bacteria known as the enterococci, which are among the

Doctors may soon find themselves unable to treat infections that were once considered routine.

leading causes of blood infections in hospitalized patients. Although the bacteria tend to attack only the sickest patients, for them they pose a serious threat. Data released in July by the New Jersey Department of Health showed a substantial increase in the number of enterococci that have acquired resistance to vancomycin, the last antibiotic of use against them. More than half the acute-care hospitals in the state reported that they had isolated vancomycin-resistant enterococci from the bloodstreams of infected patients.

A study by the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta showed that nearly 8 percent of all

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Photographs courtesy of National Archives

NA Oct. 20, 1964. Test site construction was first seen on as acquired four days after first Chinese nuclear test.



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EMLIN May 28, 1970. These images had
ig across Red Square to visit Lenin's Tomb.



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Jim Peaco/National Park Service

Pup in litter born near Yellowstone.

Triumph and Loss As Wolves Return To Yellowstone

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS

THE evening breeze had died and a setting sun was gilding the slopes of the Lamar Valley as Mike Phillips gazed across the steep ravine of Rose Creek and whispered to a visitor, "That area of matted grass to the left of the aspens and the right of the sagebrush — see it?"

There, perhaps 500 yards away, a young, gray female wolf was taking her ease. Three other young wolves, all black, soon came into view through the binoculars. Now 19 weeks old, a little bigger than coyotes and nearly half grown, the four are part of a litter of eight, the first known reproduction by resident wolves in the Yellowstone ecosystem in seven decades and a signal step toward rescuing the gray wolf from the endangered list.

It is a tale of triumph and tragedy with touches of soap opera. The unexpected birth and early survival of the Rose Creek "puppies," as their Federal monitors call them, has helped make the first seven months of the highly controversial effort to restore wolves to Yellowstone more successful than expected. But the father of the pups, a majestic, 122-pound, deep-voiced gray alpha male from Canada simply called Ten, was shot and killed, Federal officials charge, by an unemployed carpenter who took the pelt and head. If convicted, he faces a possible term in Federal prison for killing a member of an endangered species.

The mother of the pups, a black wolf called Nine, abandoned
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MUSIC
Paul Simon and other performers in unlikely roles. Page C13.



BOOKS
Ann Beattie, dissecting family secrets in a new novel. Page C17.

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