

Report from Schyst resande, October 2012:

No place in the sun: A study of working conditions in the tourism sector in Thailand and Turkey

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries, accounting for 9 per cent of global GDP and employing an estimated 260 million people directly or indirectly. Yet its effects on local communities in tourist resorts are not always positive. This report sheds light on working conditions for local employees at hotels and their suppliers in Thailand and Turkey, two of the most popular destinations for Swedish tourists.

One aim of the report is to follow up a 2008 study that documented substandard working conditions in Thailand and Brazil, including at hotels used by the largest Swedish tour operators, Apollo (part of the Kuoni Group), Ving (Thomas Cook Group plc) and Fritidsresor (TUI Travel plc). At that time only Apollo had a code of conduct, and no operator worked systematically to monitor working conditions or to prevent human rights abuses. The report serves to continue scrutiny of the tour operators' endeavours to become more socially responsible, and it presents recommendations to that end.

Underlying the report is a field study consisting mainly of interviews with 83 workers at 37 different hotels, 26 of them used by the major tour operators. Most interviewees had low-skilled jobs, for example in cleaning or gardening, though some, such as receptionists, were better qualified. Interviews were conducted off hotel premises where possible, and mostly by local experts. Workers at other establishments, including restaurants and subcontractors to the hotels in the laundry and construction sectors, as well as representatives of trade unions, NGOs and the authorities were also interviewed to provide a broader perspective. Apollo, Ving and Fritidsresor declined to participate, although they did comment on a case of serious human rights violations at a laundry in Phuket, Thailand (see the next section).

Fair Trade Center - an NGO that aims to promote fair trade with low-wage countries- and of seven organisation in the Network of Schyst resande, carried out the study. The Foundation for Education and Development, an organisation that works with the training of migrant workers in Khao Lak, Thailand, conducted part of the

field research. In Turkey the interviews were made by the local researchers Bilge Seckin Cetinkaya and Nuran Güleñc.

Thailand

Some 430,000 Swedes visited Thailand in 2011, making a valuable contribution to a local economy that depends heavily on tourism. The sector accounts for over 16 per cent of GDP and is estimated to employ nearly 4.5 million people directly or indirectly.

Thai labour law is relatively comprehensive and - if upheld - provides good protection for employees. Of 14 Thai hotel workers interviewed, eight were union members, nine had a written employment contract and almost all had received health and safety training. Only three earned less than the minimum wage, and two of these, who also said they were not entitled to sick pay or compensation for work-related injuries, were Moken people (members of a nomadic sea-faring group).

In the case of migrant workers from other countries, who make up around half of hotel staff at some resorts, the law is frequently disregarded. Of 26 Burmese hotel workers interviewed, three-quarters did not have a written contract, while one-quarter did not even have a work permit. Around half said they felt discriminated against compared with their Thai colleagues. Many live in residences provided by employers or in slum-like conditions without adequate sanitation, and all had entered the country illegally - a risky and costly journey that leaves many in debt to intermediaries. Nearly two-thirds were paid less than the minimum wage, and one-third were forced to take an extra job to make ends meet. Half said they were not entitled to sick pay or compensation for work-related injuries, and only two had received health and safety training. None were members of a union.

Further interviews with restaurant staff and construction workers who have built hotels used by the major tour operators suggest that conditions in other sectors are even worse. Illegal employment, wages far below the legal minimum (especially for women), lack of holidays and child labour are commonplace. All of the building workers interviewed had experienced problems in being paid on time (which is tantamount to a form of forced labour according to ILO conventions). They also face safety hazards on construction sites, yet in most cases are not provided with adequate protective equipment or

compensation in the event of accidents that force them to take time off work.

At one laundry in Phuket that supplies hotels used by Ving and Fritidsresor, around 10 children aged 14-16 were found working on the same tasks as adult employees. Wages here start from 190 baht (c. €4.70) per day for men and 170 baht (c. €4.20) for women, compared with a legal minimum of 300 baht in Phuket. Workers have no rights to paid holiday or sick leave, despite a poor working environment that leads to illness and injuries. Worse still, in May 2012 serious human rights violations - including workers being threatened at gunpoint and having their passports and work permits confiscated - were reported. When informed of this in June 2012, Fritidsresor replied that it was not currently in a position to monitor its partners' sub-contractors, but hoped to be able to do so in the longer term. Ving has raised the issue with the hotels concerned and taken part in an unannounced visit to the laundry. But by early September, according to a workers' representative, the situation had not improved.

QUOTES FROM THE FIELD STUDY

"I feel discriminated against by my boss. I get harder and heavier tasks than my Thai colleagues. I don't dare to ask what they earn because that could get me in trouble, but I believe they get 1,000 to 2,000 baht (c. €25 to €50) more than me."

A Burmese waiter at a hotel used by Ving

"I don't get any days off but my Thai colleagues get four a month. I don't get paid holidays either - if I take a holiday it comes out of my wages"

A Burmese dishwasher at a hotel used by Fritidsresor

"No international tour operator or hotel chain has contacted our union to discuss how working conditions can be improved. It would be good if we could have an open dialogue, and we would also like to see more preventive measures on their part."

Vijit Dasantad, Chair of the union for hotel employees in Phuket

"We only have two toilets that 50 to 60 people in the camp are supposed to share - it's nowhere near enough."

A migrant hotel worker in Thailand

"I came to Thailand through an intermediary, first to Krabi. I was forced to work off the debt at a restaurant because I couldn't afford to pay. Once, the police came

and discovered us illegal migrants, but then the boss bribed them so that we could stay. After a year I had worked off the debt."

A waitress in Thailand

"Getting pregnant isn't an option if you work at a restaurant - you won't have a job when you come back. Don't get pregnant - that's the only advice I have for my colleagues."

A waitress in Khao Lak, Thailand

"There were about 40 of us workers who didn't get our wages from the sub-contractor, not even when the building was finished. We were always ready to run off and hide if the police came to the site, because we were working illegally."

A Burmese construction worker in Thailand

"The youngest workers are 14 years old and come with their families from Burma. They earn around 180 baht per day (c. €4.50) and live with their families in rooms hired out by the factory."

A migrant worker at the laundry in Phuket

"The wages aren't enough to support a family and I really need an extra job, but I don't have the energy to work more because I'm so tired."

A migrant worker at the laundry in Phuket

Turkey

Tourism is booming in Turkey, with a record 542,000 Swedish visitors in 2011. The sector accounts for almost 11 per cent of GDP and directly or indirectly employs over 1.9 million people.

As in Thailand, the legislation on pay and working conditions appears sound on paper but is seldom fully observed. Most hotel workers are hired on a seasonal basis and are not covered by unemployment insurance. Around two-thirds are unregistered and thus do not enjoy rights under labour law. Migrant workers from countries such as Russia, the Ukraine and Indonesia as well as Kurds from eastern Turkey face discrimination. Another problem is exploitation of young people on work experience schemes.

In the Alanya area, 26 employees working in ten hotels (nine of them used by the major tour operators) were interviewed. All were registered but only 12 had written employment contracts. Two-thirds work overtime every day and, in all but two cases, without proper compensation. Nearly 40 per cent work more than the legal limit of 60

hours a week - some as many as 17 hours a day. While all received at least the minimum wage, nearly three-quarters said this was not enough to live on. The interviews revealed three cases of discrimination against women, including one who was dismissed when she became pregnant. Many employees do not feel at liberty to join unions, which are active at only two of the ten hotels.

Another hotel in the same area - the Maritim Hotel Club Alantur, which is also used by Fritidsresor and Apollo - provides a good example of how all-inclusive tourism can be combined with decent working conditions. Employees work in shifts of 7.5 hours with half an hour's break. Seasonal workers are guaranteed at least six months' employment during the year and are paid well above the minimum wage. The hotel also provides food, transport and other benefits, including parental leave and other legal rights. There is a long tradition of collective organisation at the hotel but, according to a union representative, improvements in the working environment have also come about as a result of demands from tour operators.

QUOTES FROM THE FIELD STUDY

"You have to work the whole time. Work, work, work, nothing else. The tourism sector is no good for you. But we have to work to be able to support ourselves."

A waiter at a hotel used by Fritidsresor

"The wages aren't enough to live on. But what shall we do? All the other hotels pay the same. But most of them don't even pay the wages on time."

A cleaner at a hotel used by Ving

"One woman who worked here got pregnant and when the management found out she was fired. They won't employ you either if they know you're pregnant. No employees here go on parental leave."

A cleaner at a hotel used by Apollo

"The cleaning materials used here are dangerous, I know it. They're affecting our future health, even if we don't notice anything now."

A hotel cleaner in Turkey

"We work ten hours a day without overtime while ordinary employees work eight hours. We're not allowed to take breaks even for lunch, and the boss says we can't be off work unless we're dying. If I had known the job would be so hard I would never have taken it."

A young person on a work experience placement at a hotel used by Ving

"Most people I know would want to work here - I count myself lucky that I do."

An employee at the Maritim Hotel Club Alantur

"Foreign managers in the travel sector who come here are generally more positive towards unions and efforts to improve working conditions compared with Turkish managers. They are more aware of rights and standards. But the international tour operators can improve when it comes to sharing the cost of improvements with the hotel and not squeezing prices."

A union representative at the Maritim Hotel Club Alantur

What can tour operators do to improve matters?

Apollo, Ving and Fitidsresor have taken steps over the past few years to become more socially responsible, notably by adopting ethical guidelines and including these as part of standard contracts with hotels. In addition, all seek to verify that standards are upheld through their use of Travelife, an industry-led system that inspects and certifies hotels according to environmental and social criteria.

Schyst Resande has previously highlighted shortcomings with Travelife, including a lack of independent audits and low standards in some areas (for example, a bronze-level hotel does not have to provide its staff with written employment contracts). In the present study, four of the ten hotels in Turkey were Travelife-certified, and employees at these did in fact have written contracts, while a relatively high share had received health and safety training. But there were also cases of illegal overtime, discrimination against women and other breaches of Travelife criteria. The system is currently being strengthened, with revised criteria and a requirement for independent audits.

Other general shortcomings include the weak response of the tour operators to the human rights violations revealed in Thailand, the failure to take responsibility for working conditions throughout the supply chain and a lack of transparency, including unwillingness to provide information for this report. Among Schyst Resande's recommendations to tour operators are that they should:

- act decisively to improve the situation at the laundry in Phuket and investigate conditions at other suppliers to prevent similar abuses

- ensure that all hotel workers receive at least the minimum wage and a written employment contract in a language they can understand
- conduct thorough audits of hotels, including verification of documents and interviews with workers as well as management
- promote union rights and favour hotels that have collective agreements; engage in dialogue with NGOs and union representatives on how working conditions can be improved
- carry out human rights due diligence, working to prevent abuses and intervening when they do occur, in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights and the recently adopted Framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production.

Tourism lies far behind other sectors, such as textiles, electronics and furniture, when it comes to meaningful follow-up of ethical demands, including through engagement with relevant trade unions and NGOs. Apollo, Ving and Fritidsresor still have a long journey ahead of them, but positive examples such as the above-mentioned hotel in Turkey show that the sector can contribute to decent working conditions and sustainable development in tourist destinations.

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For more information and the full report in Swedish, visit www.schystresande.se

Schyst Resande (Fair Travel) is a network of six organizations - Unionen, ECPAT, Fair Trade Center, the Swedish Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, the Church of Sweden, Church of Sweden Youth and the IOGT-NTO movement.

The network highlights various aspects of tourism and provides a holistic approach of sustainable tourism. The organisations in the network are all involved in Human Rights issues related to tourism and travelling but from different perspectives.

