

Widespread Labor Abuses Among Proposed IPEF Nations

Numerous countries within the proposed **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)** trade agreement have long track records of severe labor rights abuses — including forced labor, child labor, trade unionist assassinations and more.

Ongoing labor abuses in countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei undermine IPEF's goal of establishing a new model for international trade that prioritizes working people over corporate interests. For IPEF to truly become a “worker-centered” trade agreement, the following countries must either be eliminated from the pact's trade pillar or be required to adopt, implement and maintain **strong labor standards backed by facility-specific, rapid-response labor enforcement mechanisms** that include real penalties that hold companies responsible for violations.

PHILIPPINES

- The International Trade Union Confederation reported **at least 50 assassinations of Filipino labor leaders since 2019**, with still other labor officials arrested on “trumped up charges” or “red tagged as a communist insurgent.”¹
- Beyond detailing “**threats and violence against union members**,” the U.S. State Department also reports that Filipino employers are accused of utilizing short-term contracts and imported labor to “**minimize unionization and avoid other rights accorded to ‘regular’ workers**.”²
- The U.S. Labor Department's list of **goods from the Philippines produced by child labor includes bananas, coconuts, fish, rubber, gold and fashion accessories**.³

MALAYSIA

- Malaysia was downgraded to the lowest-possible tier in the U.S. State Department's most recent report on human trafficking, which found, “The Government of Malaysia **does not meet the minimum standards for elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so**.”⁴ Few nations' abuses are so dire as to trigger a “tier three” rating.
- Among other problems, the State Department found that the Malaysian government “did not adequately address or criminally pursue credible allegations from multiple sources alleging **labor trafficking, including in the rubber manufacturing industry and palm oil sector**, with the government owning 33 percent of the third largest palm oil company in the world.”⁵
- Beyond agricultural and rubber-related industries, **trafficked labor was also documented in Malaysia's export-heavy electronics and garment sectors**.⁶

VIETNAM

- Vietnamese law **does not allow workers to elect their own union officials** and prohibits strikes in what it deems “essential services,” including oil and gas production, telecommunications and air transportation.⁷
- The U.S. State Department finds that “The Government of **Vietnam does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking**,” with both forced labor and child forced labor found in the garment industry.⁸ Vietnamese law also does not prohibit debt bondage.⁹
- **More than 5% of Vietnamese children may be victims of coercion** and other exploitation related to human trafficking.¹⁰

THAILAND

- According to the U.S. State Department, Thai law “**does not protect union members against antiunion discrimination**” and “**does not allow migrant workers to organize trade unions.**” The law further prohibits subcontracted labor and fulltime workers from joining the same unions, and perhaps as a result, more than 45 percent of electronics and auto parts workers are subcontractors.¹¹
- The U.S. Department of Labor reports **forced child labor in Thailand’s shrimp and garment production,** and forced labor in fishing.¹²
- The U.S. State Department found, “The Government of **Thailand does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking,**” with trafficking in both agriculture and manufacturing.¹³

INDONESIA

- The Indonesian government recently **rolled back previously-existing labor standards,** including in the areas of minimum wage, health care, maternity leave, severance pay and legal protections for employment contracts.¹⁴
- The U.S. Department of Labor documents child labor in Indonesia’s palm oil, tobacco, rubber, tin mining, gold mining and other industries and says that **the Indonesian government fails to enforce child labor laws** throughout the country.¹⁵
- The U.S. State Department finds that “The Government of Indonesia **does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking,**” with forced labor found in fishing, palm oil production, mining and manufacturing.¹⁶

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

- In 2019, Brunei **made gay sex punishable by stoning.**¹⁷ After international uproar, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah pointed to the country’s decades-long moratorium on the death penalty, but the law remains on the books and “The sultan made no mention of changes to other strict punishments ... [including] whipping women convicted of having lesbian sex.”¹⁸
- The U.S. State Department finds “The Government of Brunei **does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.**”¹⁹

¹ International Trade Union Confederation. “Stand for Filipino workers’ rights on 10 December.” January 12, 2021. <https://www.ituc-csi.org/stand-for-filipino-workers-rights>

² U.S. Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Philippines.” April 12, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/philippines/>

³ U.S. Department of Labor. “List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor.” June 23, 2021. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods>

⁴ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Malaysia.” December 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/malaysia/>

⁵ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Malaysia.”

⁶ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Malaysia.”

⁷ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Vietnam.” April 12, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/vietnam/>

⁸ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Vietnam.” December 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/vietnam/>

⁹ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Vietnam.”

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Vietnam.”

¹¹ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Thailand.” April 12, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/thailand>

¹² U.S. Department of Labor. “List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor.”

¹³ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Thailand.” December 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/thailand/>

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch. “Indonesia: New Law Hurts Workers, Indigenous Groups.” October 15, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/indonesia-new-law-hurts-workers-indigenous-groups>

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Labor. “2020 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Indonesia.” September 2021. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/indonesia>

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Indonesia.” December 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/indonesia/>

¹⁷ Tan, Yvette. “Brunei implements stoning to death under anti-LGBT rules,” BBC News. April 3, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47769964>

¹⁸ Chappell, Bill. “Brunei won’t enforce death-by-stoning law for gay sex, sultan says,” NPR. May 6, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/06/720598000/brunei-wont-enforce-death-by-stoning-law-for-gay-sex-sultan-says>

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State. “2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Brunei.” December 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/brunei/>