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US

Global Horizons Indicted for Human Trafficking

Pratap Chatterjee*

WASHINGTON, Sep 15 (IPS) - Mordechai Orian, president of Global Horizons, a Los Angeles- based labour recruiter, has been indicted by the U.S. Department of Justice for "engaging in a conspiracy to commit forced labour and document servitude" of approximately 400 Thai citizens who were brought to work on farms in the U.S. between May 2004 and September 2005.

Orian was formally charged on Sep. 1 in what federal officials described as the biggest human-trafficking case ever brought by the U.S. government.

On Sep. 2, Orian "deceived and evaded federal FBI agents for approximately 24 hours by providing sporadic misleading and conflicting information concerning his location, willingness to surrender in Dallas, and failing to report," government lawyers stated in documents filed with the federal court. They further charged that Orian "flew to Hawaii on another flight to avoid contact with federal agents at the airport."

Today Orian is sitting in a Honolulu jail awaiting Judge Leslie Kobayashi's decision on a government request to deny Orian's release on one million dollars bail secured on his exclusive West Moonshadows Drive home in Malibu. Susan Cushman, assistant U.S. attorney for Hawaii, has filed documents stating that Orian is a flight risk, noting that he had used 26 different aliases and four different Social Security numbers in the past.

Multiple Court Cases

Cushman's request to keep Orian locked up until trial also described numerous violations of the law, according to a filing delivered to the Honolulu court on Sep. 9.

Cushman provided the court with a copy of a 2003 report, "Migrant Workers in Israel - A Contemporary Form of Slavery," published by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network and the International Federation for Human Rights. It states that Orian, an Israeli national, took 3,000 dollars from each of 19 Chinese workers for the "privilege" of working in Israel for two years.

"By the end of February Mr. Orian owed each of the workers between 2-3 months wages," the report concluded. "Instead of paying the workers, he sent ten armed guards to surprise the workers in their sleep, beat them and drive them to the airport, where they were forcibly deported."

In another document filed by Cushman, U.S. Department of Labour Judge William Dorsey concluded on Nov. 30, 2006 that Global Horizons Manpower, Inc. had "willfully and fraudulently represented it had contracts with Taft Farms" in Bakersfield, California to obtain temporary work visas for more than 200 workers between Aug. 1, 2003 and Apr. 30, 2004.

Dorsey found that the company had neither a contract nor jobs for the 200 workers. Unable to find them paid employment, Global Horizons fired the workers "for poor performance, when in fact, they were terminated for lack of work," Dorsey wrote in his final decision. He ordered that Orian be barred for three years from bringing guest workers into the U.S.

On Sep. 7, 2007, Philipda Modrakee, a U.S. Department of Labour investigator, filed a report on 156 Global Horizons workers employed at the Maui Pineapple Farm in Hawaii. Modrakee estimated that Global Horizons owed 459,256 dollars in fines for failure to pay wages at the minimum rate and on time, for illegally deducting money from the workers' paycheques for housing, and for failing to provide them with transportation to their work sites.

Immigration attorney Melissa Vincenty of Honolulu, who is representing 80 clients with claims against Global Horizon, told the Maui News last week that the company had confiscated the workers' passports and visas. "It is called document servitude," Vincenty told the newspaper, noting that passports are required for travel between the islands that make up the state of Hawaii.

Orian bought a twin-engine aircraft for inter-island transport of the Thai workers, thereby avoiding the necessity of presenting identification/passport to government officials, according to the documents filed before the court. Cushman noted that the airplane was recently seized as evidence.

Responding to the Government

It was against this history of questionable dealings that Orian's attorney Mark Werksman asked for his client to be released on bail. Werksman's Sep. 10 filing presented a series of arguments and documents to prove that his client was not a flight risk.

"The government appears to be asking the court to detain Mr. Orian because it thinks he is a bad employer and a chronic lawbreaker and deserves to be punished," wrote Werksman. "There is no evidence of this outside of this outside of the government's cherry-picked examples of adverse administrative rulings." And the government's immigration and labour bureaucracies are bound to have "disagreements, legal snafus and paperwork hassles."

Orian never intended to deceive the FBI, but simply took a lower-priced flight to Hawaii, Werksman says. "What Mr. Orian did not know is that the FBI intended to make a high-profile arrest at the airport," he charges in the court documents.

The 26 alleged aliases (such as O'Ryan and Moty) were "insignificant misspellings or typographical errors," Werksman added.

"He is not a flight risk, he is not a danger to society," Kara Lujan, a public relations executive, told Haaretz, an Israeli newspaper. "He pleaded not guilty. He never threatened Thai workers, never took their passports, and there is no evidence of that." **Thai Workers Stand Up**

But while Cushman and Werksman were filing competing documents in Honolulu, some of Orian's former employees were playing out a parallel drama in Los Angeles.

There, on Sep. 8, in front of the Wat Thai Buddhist temple, some 25 Thai farm workers lined up wearing sunglasses, baseball caps, and traditional Thai scarves to disguise themselves for fear of retaliation, they said. One-by-one they told media assembled at a press conference organised by the Thai Community Development Center about their treatment at the hands of Global Horizons.

One 42-year-old man told reporters that recruiters promised him a fulltime job for 1,000 dollars a month - 10 times more than he made as a rice farmer. The recruiters told him that Global Horizons could find him work picking apples in Washington and pineapples in Hawaii. Lee, a pseudonym, arrived in Seattle on Jul. 4, 2004 to discover that he would have to pay 18,000 dollars to the recruiters.

"I thought I would find freedom and jobs here," Lee said at the news conference. "I thought the United States was a civilised nation, the highest in the world. I never imagined this kind of thing could happen here."

Lee says he was housed in a wooden shack and threatened with violence and deportation if he tried to escape or to speak to any outsiders. In September 2005, Lee says he escaped one night by running through pineapple fields.

Lee's story was confirmed by Chanchanit Martorell, executive director of the Thai Community Development Center. Martorell and her staff say they have interviewed more than 200 farmworkers and filed civil charges against Global Horizons. She noted that some of the farm workers were so badly treated that they had to survive on eating leaves from plants or fish they caught in a nearby river.

The FBI says it is taking the Global Horizons case very seriously. "In the old days, they used to keep slaves in their place with whips and chains," FBI Special Agent Tom Simon told the Beverly Hills Courier. "Today, it is done with economic threats and intimidation."

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