

PRESS RELEASE

TRAFFICKING KINGPIN PLEADS GUILTY

Social Network Sex Slave Boss Gets Prison Term and Must Pay Victims

International Case Touted as New ASEAN Model of Cooperation

Bangkok, January 27, 2016: Today civil society organizations and human trafficking victims celebrated a victory against organized crime. The Thai Government has confirmed that the leader of a social network slave syndicate that lured women from Thailand and Vietnam to Malaysia for employment in restaurants, but then forced them into prostitution, has pleaded guilty, and will serve a prison sentence and financially compensate six victims. Meanwhile, another senior member of the same syndicate has been identified and was arrested over the weekend in a cross-border case that involves ongoing cooperation among NGOs, the governments of Thailand and Malaysia, and victims.

Kheng Hsiang Low, a.k.a. Steven Low, was using social media sites since December 2012 to recruit women from Thailand, Vietnam and other countries to work at a disguised brothel in Malaysia. Low was the leader of a group that also traveled to Thailand to conduct business and recruit from Bangkok, Pattaya and southern locations in Thailand. Facebook postings advertised the jobs for a club and restaurant, while in fact the women were put to work as sex workers upon arrival. Freeland helped identify the victims, and then provided information to Thailand's Department of Special Investigations (DSI), which then rescued one victim, who testified against Low through a Freeland representative. Further information corroborated and collected by DSI was used to convict Low, who pleaded guilty, while also agreeing to pay out substantial compensation to six of the victims so far. DSI's ongoing probe, assisted by the victims, also led to the capture and arrest of another Malaysian national, Sam Wong Fook Sing, last Friday, January 22nd in Dan Nok, Songkhla province, southern Thailand.

The case is ongoing and is being touted by NGOs as a victim-centric model for cross border and public-private sector collaboration. More alleged members of the syndicate are being tried in Thai court, but marking a turn from the past, the victims have agreed to testify fully through an endorsed representative of Freeland, as well as directly through live video. In the past, the overwhelming majority of victims would refuse to cooperate with authorities because they either did not trust law enforcement officers or want to face their abusers in court, or both.

"This case is a great example of how we can put more human traffickers out of business," said Freeland's Director, Steven Galster. "The key to success here was trust. Trust among the victims, the NGOs and the Government. We worked together from start to finish, and justice is being

served. Thailand's DSI and prosecutors are to be congratulated for their fine work. We are confident that more such cooperation will evolve in Thailand and across ASEAN member countries."

Last year, distressed victims reached out for help through social networking lines to friends, who in turn contacted Freeland, a counter-trafficking group, for help. Freeland in turn worked with the Department of Special Investigation (DSI), which corroborated the information and built a solid case against the syndicate. Freeland and its partner in Liberty Alliance, Exodus Road, then helped gain safety and care for the victims. Exodus sponsored care for the victims once repatriated to Thailand.

Freeland and Exodus Road are part of counter-trafficking alliance called Liberty Alliance, which also includes Liberty Asia. Liberty Alliance provides information and other technical support to law enforcement agencies, while providing care for victims and education to support prevention, as well as legal assistance. Liberty Alliance does not publicize its specific means of gathering information or providing victim care, but does advertise general help through hotlines and social media sites.

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Freeland is a frontline counter-trafficking organization working for a world that is free of wildlife trafficking and human slavery. Our team of law enforcement, development and communications specialists work alongside partners in Asia, Africa and the Americas to build capacity, raise awareness, strengthen networks and promote good governance to protect critical ecosystems and vulnerable people. For more info, visit www.freeland.org also; follow Freeland on twitter [@FREELANDpeople](https://twitter.com/FREELANDpeople) or facebook.com/freelandfoundation