

Ajinomoto Co., Inc

2024 Human Rights Due Diligence (Thailand)



The Global Alliance for Sustainable Supply Chain

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## **I. Introduction**

In accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights approved by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011 and documents such as the Japanese government's 2022 Guidelines on Respect for Human Rights in Responsible Supply Chains, Ajinomoto has asked the Global Alliance for Sustainable Supply Chain (a non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes sustainable supply chains in Japan; hereinafter referred to as the "ASSC") to conduct a human rights impact assessment in relation to the supply chain involved in the farmed shrimp in Thailand which is procured by the Ajinomoto Group and to produce this report.

\*Human rights impact assessment: An assessment concerning human rights risks that is made upon having undertaken inspections and confirmations through dialogue in relation to whether responses based on the UN Guiding Principles are being implemented.

## **II. Background and Objectives of the Study**

### **1. Background**

The Ajinomoto Group has established its Group Shared Policy on Human Rights based on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. In order to fulfill its responsibility when it comes to respecting human rights, the Group has established mechanisms for human rights due diligence to be undertaken and has provided clarification with respect to the ongoing implementation thereof.

([https://www.ajinomoto.com/sustainability/keyword/human\\_rights.php](https://www.ajinomoto.com/sustainability/keyword/human_rights.php))

Based on country-specific human rights risk assessments, human rights impact assessments have been conducted in order of priority. On this occasion, the supply chain for farmed shrimp in Thailand was selected as the subject of assessment.

\*Country-specific human rights risk assessment: Human rights risk-related data provided by Verisk Maplecroft is used to identify countries and businesses presenting prominent levels of human rights risks by country and region.

### **2. Objective**

The objective of this investigation is, through the undertaking of on-site investigations, to recognize and assess human rights risks, to consider responses to be undertaken in relation to risks based on the results of the assessments made, and to prevent and make corrections in relation to risks which exist in terms of human rights violations.

## **III. Study Method**

During this study method, a list of human rights risks was drawn up through desk research conducted before going to Thailand and followed by a confirmation of the efforts undertaken by the Ajinomoto Group. Then, assessment target areas and supply chains were identified or estimated. After arriving in Thailand, the investigation team visited shrimp farms, processing plants, and other relevant locations. In addition, interviews and dialogues were conducted with local experts, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in order to go about seeking opinions from a wide range of stakeholders.

## **IV. Results of the Study**

### **1. Pre-trip Desk Research**

Based on information provided by risk researchers in the United Kingdom, the ASSC conducted a close investigation and identified the following human rights risks commonly assumed to exist in Thailand and in the Thai shrimp industry.

- (1) Vulnerable rights holder groups [child workers/migrant workers (unauthorized migrants)/individuals working at home in irregular employment arrangements]
- (2) Modern slavery and forced labor
- (3) Demanding of excessive recruitment fees (unreasonable recruitment process)
- (4) Retention of workers' identification cards (restrictions on movement)

- (5) Excessive working hours/illegal wage deductions
- (6) Lack of freedom of association and collective bargaining
- (7) Working environments and conditions such as those having to do with occupational health and safety

## 2. Confirmation on the Ajinomoto Group

### (1) Initiatives to Date

In 2019, Ajinomoto Co., Inc. conducted a human rights impact assessment for its farmed shrimp supply chain in Thailand, which means that this was the second time such an assessment was conducted. At the time of the assessment in 2019, the ASSC had pointed out in its report to the Ajinomoto Group the importance of confirming the following three items.

- (i) Transparency of hiring processes/appropriate hiring processes for migrant workers
- (ii) Systems involving mechanisms for complaint handling for the purpose of handling complaints
- (iii) Outreach for migrant workers in their home countries (active delivery of information and support)

### (2) Supply Chain Structure



\*There are several trading companies and processors. There are hundreds to thousands of aquaculture ponds

## 3. On-Site Survey

### (1) Processor A

This is a shrimp processing and frozen food manufacturer with approximately 3,000 employees. It is under the umbrella of a holding company that operates many businesses across multiple industries. It has acquired ASC, BAP, BRC, GMP, and HACCP certifications. The company buys shrimp from more than 2,000 aquaculture ponds. 250 of the affiliated aquaculture ponds have obtained international certifications under ASC and Best Aquaculture Practices<sup>1</sup> (BAP). Others are certified by GAP, Thai Chain of Custody (CoC), Thai Labor Standard (TLS), etc. When it comes to the procurement policy of the company concerned, it deals with aquaculture ponds that have at least a Thai certification. SMETA audits are also being conducted. About 80% of the employees are from neighboring Myanmar. The remaining 20% are Thai employees. The Ethical Recruitment Policy, which was enacted on January 1, 2020, and revised on February 1, 2024, mentions the concept of a "zero recruitment fee." The company said that with the zero-fee system, employees would not have to bear any of the expenses themselves and that the system would be applied to individuals from Myanmar hired starting in 2024. Before the COVID-19 outbreak (2020 and earlier), the company hired workers locally (through brokers in Myanmar) and paid for the processing costs while employees paid a portion of expenses (such as passport and travel expenses). After the COVID-19 pandemic had ended, new hires were limited to Thai nationals or those from Myanmar who [already] had a work permit in Thailand. As a result, there were no individuals to whom the zero-fee system was applicable. When employees hired in 2023 onward were asked about the situation, it was found that there were cases here and there wherein payments had been issued to brokers or others for permits to leave Myanmar or to obtain work permits in Thailand. Workdays are Monday to Saturday (with two shifts: 08:00 to 17:00 and 18:00 to 03:00). Days off are on Sundays and public holidays. The contracts involved consist of day-labor contracts, but the payment of wages takes place twice a month (with the amount thereof being above the local minimum wage). The employees have employment contracts that are renewed when the content of their work changes from that which was outlined in the contract at the time of hiring. Employees are covered by social insurance with 5% of their wages being deducted. One

<sup>1</sup> [BAP\(Best Aquaculture Practices\)](#)

of the women interviewed was a pregnant woman who was covered by social insurance. She stated that she had no concerns about giving birth in Thailand as she would not need to pay for her hospital expenses and would be able to receive a lump sum for childbirth. Medical checkups are conducted once a year and evacuation drills are conducted twice a year. The company provides uniforms worn during commutes as well as work clothes worn at worksites. There is a dormitory where workers can live for a fee (with 2 rooms per person along with a lavatory and shower). If there are no rooms available in the dormitory, some workers share rented apartments with their colleagues. When they run into trouble, they contact a platform provided by administrative agency (labor bureau) for consultation.

## **(2) Aquaculture Farm A**

A visit was made to a shrimp farm in its 26th year of operation located about an hour and a half west of Bangkok by car. There, dialogues were conducted. The farm is affiliated with Shrimp Processor A and has acquired Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)<sup>2</sup> certification with their support. ASC certification has been acquired by [only] 35 aquaculture farms in Thailand. This aquaculture farm has been visited for observation by those from other Thai provinces as it serves as a model and successful case within the region. The farm, which owns 45 ponds, acquired ASC certification in 2023. It did so due to its success in raising whiteleg shrimp and because management believed that they should get an early start on the process of becoming compliant with international standards. Prior to the acquisition of ASC certification, the farm had obtained Good Aquaculture Practices (GAP)<sup>3</sup> certification. The farm employs one Thai national and eight people from Myanmar. Working shifts are essentially fixed. They take place from 08:00 to 17:00 and from 06:00 to 13:00 on Mondays to Fridays. Employees are given a break of one hour and they are able to use the lavatory and drink water freely. Employees have social insurance and are provided with water, electricity, and two meals (breakfast and lunch) at their residence. Most of the employees are from Myanmar, but they can communicate in Thai. The farm employs people from Myanmar who already have Thai work permits and directly employs their relatives and children through referrals provided by those employees. It was stated that they would not use brokers because there would be fees involved in doing so. There are also employees whose children go to schools in Thailand, and they have no problem reading and writing in Thai. Employment contracts and other such documents are issued in the Burmese language. Salaries were confirmed as being paid based on a monthly contract with the amounts above the local minimum wage. There was no provision regarding overtime in the contract (based on Thai law, overtime is defined as time which exceeds 30 minutes but does not count time spent at the workplace before the start of the work shift). If a request for special work is issued, such as for cutting the grass, the individual is paid in cash with an advance notice being issued in relation to the matter. The hotline used for consultation does not belong to the aquaculture farm. The farm provides employees with information on a platform belonging to an administrative agency (labor bureau). It was stated that this service is provided in multiple languages. Regarding occupational health and safety, protective equipment is provided, and safety training is provided on a monthly basis by Processor A. Although training takes place in the Thai language, it was stated that there is a Burmese language interpreter present during the training.

## **(3) Processor B**

This was the second visit to the company following the previous visit undertaken in 2019. Certifications have been acquired such as those of BAP, British Retail Consortium (BRC), and the Global Standard for Food Safety. The company says that it is beneficial from a business standpoint to acquire certifications for international standards. The company has more than 500 employees, around 80% of whom are from Myanmar. The proportion of Thai workers has increased when compared to the figure ascertained in 2019 (when more than 90% of workers were from Myanmar). The company said that it provided assistance to migrant workers when applying for passports, work permits and visas\*.

\*They provide explanations on working conditions, wages, and other conditions to job applicants, and asked them to submit the necessary documents (such as passports, work permits, ID cards, and copies of family registers) if they were willing to work under those conditions (according to the statement of the person in charge). At present, it can be seen that the MOU System<sup>4</sup> is not used to hire new migrant workers and that

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<sup>2</sup> [ASC \(Aquaculture Stewardship Council\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [GAP \(Good Aquaculture Practices\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> The MOU System is the nickname given to the process of accepting legal migrant workers as stipulated in the bilateral memorandums of understanding concluded between Thailand and the three neighboring countries of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. This mechanism allows

many instances of hiring involve workers who have already entered Thailand and have obtained the necessary documents. Furthermore, it was stated that most of the applicants were relatives of employees already working for the company.

Employment contracts are entered into on the first day of employment. Work rules, corporate policies and other elements are explained during an orientation taking place after workers join the company. Occupational health and safety training is provided at each workplace (based on the risks involved at each workplace). Each department has staff who can speak both the Burmese and Thai languages.

The individuals from Myanmar who were interviewed on this occasion brought their passports and ID cards [to the interview]. They stated that they always carry their passports and ID cards with them and keep them in private lockers while working. Some employees had both a red passport issued by their government (the Myanmar government) and a green passport (IC), which is only valid in Thailand, issued by the Myanmar Embassy in Thailand. Also, when the situation in terms of work permits and visas was checked, it was the case that the company renews them every two years on behalf of the employees, and the renewal fees (including health insurance fees) are borne by the individuals to whom the work permits or visas pertain. The individuals, however, are not charged agency fees.

Many people rent and share rooms in the neighborhood (there is no company dormitory). There is a shuttle bus available for those who live far from the company. Wages are paid on a per-diem basis and the amount paid corresponds to the minimum wage set in the region. Wages are paid via bank transfer on the 5th and 20th of each month, and long-time employees receive a bonus in April (before the Songkran Festival). In terms of communication, half of the interviewees were from areas close to Thailand and therefore learning Thai is not that difficult for them. There were also comments provided that young people were studying Thai at their own expense at language schools.

#### **(4) Aquaculture Farm B**

A visit was made to a shrimp farm located southwest of Bangkok. The aquaculture ponds are compliant with both CoC (certified by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives<sup>5</sup> and the Department of Fisheries<sup>6</sup>) and GAP, which are certifications that are specialized in shrimp farming and are issued by the Department of Fisheries. Employees from Myanmar manage the ponds on a daily basis, and a team of 10-15 local villagers (Thai) harvest the shrimp once every 3-4 months. The villagers do not work full-time and usually make a living from farming, etc. Employees are responsible for managing one pond each, which they take care of on a daily basis (by checking the state of growth, feeding, removing various kinds of garbage, etc.). They also provide harvest instructions to the teams mentioned above at harvest time. Harvesting is a major event, and a bonus is given according to the amount harvested (the bonus is distributed by the leader of the harvesting team).

Of the 10 employees at the farm, all are from Myanmar except for a Thai manager who has fishery-related knowledge and experience. The employees are relatives of one another (family members and siblings, etc.) with three women being the spouses of employees. The women do the work of preparing the feed for the shrimp. Since the work involves living things, there is work to be done every day and there are no regular days off. When it comes to work shifts, they start work after breakfast (which takes place at 07:00) and work from 08:00 to 12:00. After a break taking place from 12:00 to 15:00, they work again from 15:00 to 18:00. As such, they thought that there were no problems with the arrangement since there was time in between when work was not done. In addition to the above hours, they sometimes work at night to undertake tasks such as feeding the shrimp (depending on the condition of the shrimp).

Wages are paid monthly with money for meals also being provided on a separate basis. When checking with people from Myanmar for the communication of work instructions and other information, it was found that 4-5 people from Myanmar can speak Thai and that instructions are conveyed through those individuals (there were no operational problems found to exist due to the language situation). If someone feels unwell, they are taken to a nearby hospital if necessary. They are covered by health insurance (which has been made compulsory by the government when applying for a work permit). In addition, medical examinations are conducted at the time of the renewal of work permits.

It was confirmed that employees had acquired Certificate of Identity (CI; a green-colored passport), which are issued to irregular migrant workers. If staff are found to be employed without a work permit, the employer will

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foreign nationals to enter the country by having procedures undertaken through intermediary agencies that have been approved by the competent authorities of both countries. In principle, workers using the system are granted permission to work for four years.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.moac.go.th/moaceng-organization>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www4.fisheries.go.th/dof\\_en](https://www4.fisheries.go.th/dof_en)

be subject to fines of 300,000 baht per person. Thus, the company makes sure to check work permits at the time of employment and to renew the permits regularly. At the time of the visit, the manager stored items such as passports and identification cards in the office (the circumstances involved have not been confirmed). Employees can apply for regular work permit renewals by themselves, but due to language issues and the complexity of the application system involved, it is better to use a broker. The total cost involved is more than 20,000 baht for a 2-year renewal. According to the manager, the company has hired employee relatives as mentioned before. It hires people who have already obtained work permits but it has not ascertained how they came about acquiring those work permits.

Three male employees from Myanmar were asked about their jobs and lives. Two of them have spouses working at the same aquaculture pond. Since the work involves the daily management of shrimp, there are no regular days off provided. The employees said that in addition to a salary, they receive a bonus once every three months and said that they were earning as much as was expected. Protective equipment necessary for work, such as boots, is provided to employees. A place to live is provided by the manager with no rent being paid. The employees travel by motorbike (borrowed from the owner each time). They do their daily shopping in the neighborhood (and ask the owner to buy things that are not available in the neighborhood). The owner takes them to the hospital when they are not feeling well, and they do not pay for any expenses incurred. They say that they have not had any trouble with their lives in Thailand but that they consult with the owner if they do.

#### **(5) Processor C**

This company was established in 1989 and located in Rayong. It processes boiled and raw shrimp. It produces for China, Japan, and Taiwan (it does not produce for Europe and America). GMP, HACCAP and BAP certifications have been acquired. Based on requests from trading companies, the company is currently considering the acquisition of ASC. The company has 269 employees that are paid by the day and 79 employees paid on a monthly basis. When it comes to employees from Myanmar, there are 250 people paid by the day and three people paid on a monthly basis. The three employees being paid on a monthly basis are leaders with many years at the company and can speak Thai. In the past, hiring was conducted under a bilateral agreement (MOU) between Myanmar and Thailand, but the last case of hiring which involved the usage of this system was four years ago. The company is currently conducting hiring through two brokers. If an employee wants to introduce a family member or relative in Myanmar to the company, he or she will contact the broker mentioned above (\*contact information is shared with employees) and entry into Thailand takes place at the individual's own expense. Employment contracts are written in the Thai and Burmese languages. Most of the notices in the processing plant were written in both the Thai and Burmese languages. 60% of employees keep their passports and work permits in their personal lockers (as they are not allowed to bring them into the workplace), and the remaining 40% leave their passports and work permits with the HR department when they go to work and get them back when they leave for the day. Work shifts last 8 hours per day, but the working hours vary depending on the time at which raw materials arrive. The delivery of raw materials is decided three days (at the earliest) before the relevant tasks take place. Employees are informed of the next day's working hours in the evening on the day before.

Six employees (male and female) from Myanmar were interviewed. Almost all of them came to Thailand at the recommendation of family or relatives already working in Thailand (such as their mother, brother, wife, or uncle) and are now working for the company. Some employees had all of their family members (including their parents) working at the processing plant. As mentioned previously, they have to pay expenses involved in entering the country on their own. It was stated that the company was making arrangements for work permit applications (it seems that a portion of the expenses were deducted from one's salary). Employment contracts are renewed at the same time as the renewal of work permits. Salaries are paid every 15 days, and the employees are enrolled in insurance. As for residences, there is a dormitory, which requires that rent be paid, located within walking distance. It is equipped with Wi-Fi, toilets and showers, and employees can cook in their own rooms. There were no complaints about the size of the rooms. Motorcycles used for transportation are purchased by each individual and shopping can be done in the neighborhood. Work shifts start at 08:00 every day. Attendance is managed via fingerprint authentication. After fingerprint authentication takes place, the workers change into their uniforms (uniforms are provided by the company). Safety training (with interpretation in the Burmese language) is provided for new employees. Evacuation drills are conducted once a year. Fire extinguishers are installed in dormitories and evacuation drills are conducted in both processing plants and dormitories. There is a system in place to take employees to the hospital when injuries occur.

## **(6) Aquaculture Farm C**

This is an aquaculture farm located in Trat near the border with Cambodia. The farm acquired ASC certification five to six years ago based on the recommendation of a processing plant which the farm deals with. While there were positive effects expected to manifest in terms of business (such as in terms of exports), the expected effects were not obtained as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred after acquisition. However, the relationship with the processing plant with which they worked to obtain the certification became good, meaning that they were able to receive continuous support and orders. The total cost of obtaining ASC certification was about 1 million baht, which was fully paid by the processing plant mentioned above. The aquaculture farm was able to obtain the certification relatively smoothly because it had already obtained the relevant certification in Europe. Maintaining the certification, however, is difficult (audits take place once every six months). Due to the barriers involved in terms of costs, the farm is the only shrimp farm which had acquired ASC certification in Trat.

All employees are Cambodian. Initially, people were hired through referrals from government agencies, and later, after receiving referrals from other employees, people who were already working in Thailand (another fish farm) were hired, as well as employee friends and relatives in Cambodia. People arriving in Thailand from Cambodia must apply at a branch office of the Immigration Bureau in the province of Trat. Passport and work permit acquisition costs are borne by the individuals themselves. The farm goes through brokers when it comes to the procedures for passports and work permits and the farm owner pays the fees involved.

There are 21 ponds divided into 4 zones which are managed by 4 leaders who can speak Thai together with 21 others. Days off are taken on a rotating basis. Monthly salaries are calculated based on 10-day increments and paid in cash once each period. In addition to a salary, employees receive one annual bonus and receive a harvest allowance three times a year. The arrangement where payments are issued every 10 days was set up to accommodate people who had just entered the country and would thus lack funds.

During the harvest season, a team of about 10 Thai fishers and farmers in the area visit each aquaculture pond (they are a group of individuals who are also responsible for harvesting durian and other crops). A list of harvest teams is kept in accordance with ASC regulations.

Three Cambodian leaders were interviewed. Two of them were born and raised in Thailand. Their passports are good for 10 years (and are renewed back in Cambodia) with their work permits being renewed every 2 years. They live in a residence on the farm with each family having one room. They live with their wives and children. Their wives are working as staff at a hotel run by the owner of the farm. Rice and water are provided free of charge, and they said that the owner bought their mode of transport (motorbikes) for them. Safety training for pond management involves teaching how to handle boats along with how to swim and dive (in case a fall happens). They said that there was nothing particularly difficult about the work.

## **4. Dialogue with Local Experts**

### **(1) International Organization for Migration (IOM) Thailand**

This was the second visit following the one which took place in 2019. Information was collected and opinions were exchanged on human rights issues for migrant workers.

< Information on Human Rights of Migrant Workers in Thailand (General Information Provided by IOM) >

There are two main ways to enter Thailand from the three countries that share a border with it (Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia). There is the official route based on a bilateral agreement (MOU) and the route involving "in country registration" undertaken by the Thai government after the individual enters Thailand. The latter was (originally) a system available only for a limited time and is said to be inadequate as an immigration system. In addition, complex registration procedures serve as a barrier and many applications for registration are made through specialized brokers.

Many migrant workers have to pay registration fees, including payments to brokers due to language problems and complex systems being involved, which may contribute to the high debt levels of a certain proportion of migrants from Myanmar (who were the subject of the IOM investigation). Migrant workers continue to face human rights risks as they are vulnerable when it comes to situations such as child labor, forced labor, intimidation, discrimination, limited access to health care and social protection, and unfair employment (wage delays, wages below the minimum wage, etc.).



## **(2) National Bureau of Agriculture Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS)**

Collection of information on Good Aquacultural Practice (GAP) at the National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS).

The GAP standards for shrimp farms in Thailand are strict (with societal and environmental items being configured) in accordance with the requirements of export markets mainly in Europe and the United States and are divided into several levels. Initiatives have also been made to comply with labor laws, emphasizing social and environmental responsibility, and elements of animal welfare have also been incorporated. ACFS is continuing its Initiatives to promote GAP certification.

## **V. Summary**

This was the second study following the one which was undertaken in 2019. According to the desk research conducted before the trip, in general, human rights risks still exist in Thailand after 5 years (regardless of the Ajinomoto Group). Based on the results of the research that was undertaken, the inspection was conducted through dialogue in Thailand. \*One processing factory that was visited last time and two processing companies that were not visited last time were visited this time, with three fish farms also being visited. One fish farm which was visited last time was not visited this time.

The processing plants and fish farms which were visited this time are managed and operated at levels which can serve as model cases in Thailand (owing to elements such as the obtaining of or aiming for the acquisition of ASC certification). Human rights initiatives are also being promoted there, and we felt that the working environments and employment conditions were good. As far as could be confirmed with the two trading companies (which do business with the Ajinomoto Group) in addition to the inspection, it can be inferred that consideration for human rights will continue to be given in the places visited this time. On the other hand, while the circumstances have not been confirmed, there were gaps seen at some of the places visited between what is stipulated in international standards and the operation taking place on site, with examples being the storage of employee work permits by the owner within the office and situations where there were no regular vacation days given (as a prerequisite for employment). As far as can be confirmed via the preliminary desk research investigation mentioned above and the information provided by IOM Thailand, serious potential and actualized human rights risks continue to exist in Thailand, generally speaking. In view of the gaps seen in relation to international standards at some of the places visited, we believe that the Ajinomoto Group needs to continue to monitor the Thai aquaculture supply chain. The Ajinomoto Group also needs to communicate information on Group policies and international standards (international requirements) to the parties involved in the supply chain (trading companies, processors, and aquaculture farms) and conduct activities which serve to promote the implementation thereof.

## **VI. Recommendations Provided to the Ajinomoto Group**

- **Continuation of human rights due diligence in accordance with international standards and Japanese government guidelines**
  - (i) Assessment and identification of human rights risks through dialogue with stakeholders and information gathering, (ii) reduction and correction of human rights violations and risks, (iii) continuous monitoring, and (iv) information disclosure and awareness building (for the Group and business partners)
  
- **Improvement of human rights literacy in the supply chain and promotion of implementation of mechanisms for respecting human rights**
  - (i) Compilation and sharing of best practices in reduction of human rights risks, (ii) establishment of contact points for consultation on the handling of complaints and the dissemination of information on objectives, and
  - (iii) establishment and dissemination of rules concerning appropriate employment of and work conducted by migrant workers and foreign workers