Significant Strides Made in Thailand’s Battle against IUU Fishing

Among the many pressing issues accorded priority by the Thai Government, the problem of IUU fishing is at the forefront. Over the past three years, the Government has spared no effort in its fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in Thailand, with the battle being waged on many fronts simultaneously. It is worth highlighting some of them.

A strong legal framework is an essential foundation for the Government’s endeavours and, in this regard, a new law was passed in 2015 governing the entire fisheries sector. Furthermore, necessary amendments to existing legislation have been made and over 100 new implementing regulations have been enacted. This comprehensive legal reform of the fishing industry has enabled the Government to gain complete oversight over fishing activities, while also providing the tools to punish violators of the law.

Fisheries management is of utmost importance in order to prevent overfishing and ensure the sustainability of marine resources. New regulations were issued to control fishing gears with high-catch capacities. Fishing methods deemed to be highly destructive were prohibited. The period of validity of fishing licenses issued to fishing vessels will henceforth take into account the quantity of existing fish stocks that can be caught on a sustainable basis.

Fleet management lies at the heart of the anti-IUU campaign, with the Government undertaking a complete reform of the fishing fleet databases and the vessel registration database. The authorities have revoked the registrations of vessels which have expired but had not yet been removed from the system. Five rounds of inspections of all commercial fishing vessels in Thailand have been conducted in order to determine the correct number and details of the vessels. As a result, the number of commercial fishing vessels has been reduced by around 60 percent to just over 10,000 vessels with fishing licenses. Various approaches have been used to cut down on the number of vessels, including a “buy-back scheme” in which all illegal vessels will be purchased by the Government and decommissioned over the next few years.

Measures have also been taken to prevent illegal vessels, such as those without licenses, from re-entering the system, including by creating a watch list that is shared with all the inspection authorities. Strict controls have been placed on vessel registration, particularly by suspending all new registrations for a period of two years starting in July 2018. This will enable the authorities to have more time for a thorough examination of the existing fishing vessels as well as address the problem of fishing overcapacity.

Monitoring, control and surveillance of illegal IUU fishing activities has been vastly improved by the Thai authorities. A total of 30 so-called “Port-in-Port-Out (PIPO) Control Centers have been established in 22 coastal provinces for
this purpose. A Vessel Monitoring System was made mandatory on large fishing vessels in order that the authorities will be able to trace their locations and fishing activities. Various government agencies conduct patrols at sea to inspect vessels for illegal activities. And each time the vessels depart or land at the ports, routine inspections are conducted by officials, while catch data is electronically recorded.

In terms of traceability, the Thai authorities have put in place systems to trace the origins of marine animal catches from both inside and outside Thailand. In particular, two new electronic databases have been developed to strengthen Thailand’s national traceability system. This is aimed at ensuring that no IUU aquatic and fisheries products can enter the Thai market and production chain for exportation.

Central to the Thai Government’s fight against IUU fishing is law enforcement, and rightfully so. Special Arrest Teams have been formed to instigate more arrests of offenders at sea. This is augmented by the use of aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct air surveillance in conjunction with sea patrols by an undercover vessel. It must be noted that the Thai Government’s vigorous law enforcement efforts and expedited prosecution process have resulted in a total of 4,448 IUU or human trafficking cases being brought before the Criminal Court since May 2015, with almost 90 percent of them being concluded and prosecutions made. This has led to numerous convictions and hefty fines.

As can be seen, significant strides have been made over the past three years in Thailand’s efforts to prevent, deter and eliminate all IUU fishing in the country. Nonetheless, the Government would be the first to admit that more remains to be done. It is generally agreed that there can be no letting up in the Government’s efforts until the ultimate goal of an IUU-free Thailand is achieved, with sustainable fisheries ensured for future generations.

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