

Certified to fish

Jakarta conference brings hope to fishermen the world over



(L-R): Marzuki Usman (FIHRRST), H.E. Patrick Herman, Minister Susi Pudjiastuti, Dinna Wisnu (AICHR), Marzuki Darusman (FIHRRST), Makarim Wibisono (FIHRRST)

The International Conference on Human Rights Protection in the Fishing Industry held on Monday 27 March in Jakarta, Indonesia was the culmination of almost two years of intensive effort since the revelation by the Associated Press of the tragic events in Bejina and Ambon. The

face of slavery can never be pleasant and Indonesia determined to banish it from the nation's fishing industry.

In tackling this and other crimes associated with the scourge of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUUF) that skims billions of dollars annually from the world's oceans, Indonesian Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti sought counsel from acknowledged experts in a whole range of fields. The end result has seen the evolution of ground-breaking regulation that mandates a human rights certification process as a prerequisite to obtain a licence to operate in the Indonesian fisheries industry.

Convened by the Ministry and FIHRRST, in cooperation with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and with support from the Belgian Foreign Ministry, the Jakarta conference provided an opportunity to reveal the thinking behind the regulation to representatives of ASEAN and other nations present. More than that, however, it permitted broader discussion on what the adoption of similar regulation by other nations could mean for the industry worldwide, as well as the economic pluses of being able to assure consumers that the fish they were buying had NOT been caught by slaves.

Among the speakers was a representative from a state-owned fishery company that had been the first to undergo the certification process, feeling to need to lead and set an example to the rest of the industry. He saw value in the process and his first step had been to brief his employees on their rights and the company's obligations. He did admit, however, that ignorance of what was actually required was currently playing a major role, plus with the industry being one of tradition handed down from one generation to the next there was a general lack of procedures being actually documented. Moreover, many of the more traditional fishermen have still to be persuaded that some of the safety procedures really are necessary.

Manpower Minister Hanif Dhakiri, meanwhile, was highly supportive of his fellow ministry for having implemented the regulations, suggesting that it showed the Indonesian government's commitment to protect the human rights of all stakeholders in the industry. He went on to say that while all companies operating in the fishing industry had not complied with international human rights principles, "It becomes our challenge to resolve the problems."

With Belgium being a major EU gateway and importer of fishery products, Belgian Ambassador to Indonesia, Patrick Herman, was proud that his country had been able to play a role in this important international breakthrough. "Human rights are not a liability on paper," he said, "but an important asset that can boost the competitiveness of a company."

FIHRRST founders were there in force, of course, Chairman Marzuki Darusman praising the efforts of the Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry in issuing the regulations. "Making it

mandatory for corporations to undergo human rights certification if they want to operate in Indonesian waters, gives the regulations teeth,” he said, “as voluntary compliance with the Guiding Principles has not been very effective to date.”

James Kallman concurred, “Certification brings with it certainty, certainty for the company that it’s doing things right and certainty for the ultimate regulator, the consumer, who can be assured that the fish they are eating comes from a human rights compliant source.”

Another FIHRRST speaker, H.S. Dillon, was careful to stress that this was not just about the eradication of slave labour, important though that may be. For while certification requires standards for fishermen on larger vessels, this must not come at the expense of the livelihood rights of small-scale fishermen who have suffered more than most from the ravages of IUUF. The future must ensure a more equitable distribution of the riches of the sea, thus enabling traditional fishing communities to share in the economic advancement of the nation.

For her part, Minister Susi has been very vocal in her support of upholding the human rights of those involved in the fishing industry and revealed that during a visit to Hawaii, Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla had met with Indonesian fishermen who were prevented from going ashore due to the lack of the necessary paperwork. “It means they are victims of human trafficking,” Susi asserted. “We cannot let this happen.” This only added fuel to her recent comment, “We’ve made it safe for your nationals operating in Indonesia waters; who is going to protect the rights of Indonesians working on fishing boats in your waters?” With perhaps 600,000 Indonesians at risk according to some counts, that’s indeed a pertinent question.

Fortunately for those in the industry, though, it looks as if this matter is starting to receive wider attention, for FIHRRST can confirm that Monday’s Conference in Jakarta was being discussed around the EU Parliament in Brussels the following day. Moreover, a number of prominent international NGOs have started to show interest in the concept of mandatory certification as a means to ensure respect for human rights, while the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights remains supportive of FIHRRST’s work on the development of certification standards.

To borrow a phrase from a different time, let’s hope this is the end of the beginning and henceforth other countries will follow Indonesia’s lead in implementing mandatory human rights certification for their fishing industries so that ‘Certified to Fish’ becomes an international banner under which fishermen the world over, and their families, can more justly benefit from the toils of their ancient calling.