

Sailor's ordeal reveals lack of labor protection

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Agnes Anya

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Sacrificing his childhood dream to be a policeman, a young man from a small village in Banyumas, Central Java, instead resigned himself to becoming a sailor, but what happened after he signed up lifted the curtain on Indonesia's lack of a system to manage and protect its seafarers.

After graduating from high school in 2016, the then-18-year old, identified only as IU, was tempted with a job on a tanker offered by an official in his village.

The official said IU would be paid Rp 9 million (US\$652) monthly, but he first had to make a deposit of Rp 10.5 million to the company, said IU's mother, Sri.

"[The official] announced it during a regular residents' meeting. As we went home, I told him to register," Sri said on Thursday. "That was my biggest mistake as a parent. I should have been more critical about it."

Applying for the job in July 2016, IU was instead sent to be a crew member of a Chinese fishing vessel operating off Gabon, West Africa, five months later.

The vessel reportedly belonged to the Sultan Marine Agency, which had an office in North Jakarta, but was later found not to be registered with the Transportation Ministry.

Deceived and physically abused, IU was eventually rescued from the vessel at dock in February by the ministry in cooperation with the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (SBMI).

"There are elements of human trafficking in IU's case," said Haryanto from the SBMI, who has been giving legal assistance to his family. "IU's data was counterfeited so that he could go as a sailor without any particular training to be one."

For instance, Haryanto said, IU was given a sailor book without any safety training, which is required for the document.

"IU was also not paid what he was promised before," said Haryanto, adding that the victim was paid in Gabonese currency equal to some \$1,400 in total for his 15-month stint aboard the vessel, much less than the promised Rp 9 million monthly.

Haryanto said that the family had reported the case to the National Police, which is currently investigating. He also said IU's case could be revealed because his family had sought help from the union, adding that there are other Indonesians suffering similar ordeals.

Lalu Muhammad Iqbal, the ministry's director for the protection of citizens abroad, said there was an indication 29 other Indonesians had been sent to Gabon by the company, which reportedly has nine vessels.

"However, we could not save the others, because we want to clarify their cases and complete the data first," said Iqbal. "Once we get them complete, we will definitely rescue them."

More than 700 human trafficking cases were handled by the ministry every year, Iqbal said. Nearly half involve sailors, particularly those on foreign fishing vessels. Such cases, Iqbal said, resulted from Indonesia not having a management system for fishing vessel crew.

"There is a regulation on ship crew members for commercial vessels, like tankers or cruise ships, but not for fishing vessels," he said.

Meanwhile, the head of the Transportation Ministry's sailor division, Dedtri Anwar, denied there was a lack of regulations. He pointed to the Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers Abroad, saying the agency had the relevant regulations.

"But we do not know to what extent the regulations rule placement and protection," he said.

He added that the transportation and foreign ministries were working with the agency to set up regulations to protect sailors.