

Palm oil labor abuses linked to world's top brands, banks

[washingtonpost.com/business/palm-oil-labor-abuses-linked-to-worlds-top-brands-banks/2020/09/24/d51fa282-fed7-11ea-b0e4-350e4e60cc91_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/palm-oil-labor-abuses-linked-to-worlds-top-brands-banks/2020/09/24/d51fa282-fed7-11ea-b0e4-350e4e60cc91_story.html)

September 25, 2020



PENINSULAR MALAYSIA — Jum's words tumble out over the phone, his voice growing ever more frantic.

Between sobs, he says he's trapped on a Malaysian plantation run by government-owned Felra, one of the world's largest palm oil companies. His boss confiscated and then lost his Indonesian passport, he says, leaving him vulnerable to arrest. Night after night, he has been forced to hide from authorities, sleeping on the jungle floor, exposed to the wind and the rain. His biggest fear: the roaming tigers.

All the while, Jum says his supervisor demanded he keep working, tending the heavy reddish-orange palm oil fruit that has made its way into the supply chains of the planet's most iconic food and cosmetics companies like Unilever, L'Oreal, Nestle and Procter & Gamble.

"I am not a free man anymore," he says, his voice cracking. "I desperately want to see my mom and dad. I want to go home!"

An Associated Press investigation found many like Jum in Malaysia and neighboring Indonesia – an invisible workforce consisting of millions of laborers from some of the poorest corners of Asia, many of them enduring various forms of exploitation, with the most serious abuses including child labor, outright slavery and allegations of rape. Together, the two countries produce about 85% of the world's estimated \$65 billion palm oil supply.

Palm oil is virtually impossible to avoid. Often disguised on labels as an ingredient listed by more than 200 names, it can be found in roughly half the products on supermarket shelves and in most cosmetic brands. It's in paints, plywood, pesticides and pills. It's also present in animal feed, biofuels and even hand sanitizer.

The AP interviewed more than 130 current and former workers from two dozen palm oil companies who came from eight countries and labored on plantations across wide swaths of Malaysia and Indonesia. Almost all had complaints about their treatment, with some saying they were cheated, threatened, held against their will or forced to work off unsurmountable debts. Others said they were regularly harassed by authorities, swept up in raids and detained in government facilities.

They included members of Myanmar's long-persecuted Rohingya minority, who fled ethnic cleansing in their homeland only to be sold into the palm oil industry. Fishermen who escaped years of slavery on boats also described coming ashore in search of help, but instead ending up being trafficked onto plantations -- sometimes with police involvement.

The AP used the most recently published data from producers, traders and buyers of the world's most-consumed vegetable oil, as well as U.S. Customs records, to link the laborers' palm oil and its derivatives from the mills that process it to the supply chains of top Western companies like the makers of Oreo cookies, Lysol cleaners and Hershey's chocolate treats.

Reporters witnessed some abuses firsthand and reviewed police reports, complaints made to labor unions, videos and photos smuggled out of plantations and local media stories to corroborate accounts wherever possible. In some cases, reporters tracked down people who helped enslaved workers escape. More than a hundred rights advocates, academics, clergy members, activists and government officials also were interviewed.

This story was funded in part by the McGraw Center for Business Journalism at CUNY's Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

Though labor issues have largely been ignored, the punishing effects of palm oil on the environment have been decried for years. Still, giant Western financial institutions like Deutsche Bank, BNY Mellon, Citigroup, HSBC and the Vanguard Group have continued to

help fuel a crop that has exploded globally, soaring from just 5 million tons in 1999 to 72 million today, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The U.S. alone has seen a 900 percent spike in demand during that same time.

Sometimes they invest directly but, increasingly, third parties are used like Malaysia-based Maybank, one of the world's biggest palm oil financiers, which not only provides capital to growers but, in some cases, processes the plantations' payrolls. Financial crime experts say that in an industry rife with a history of problems, banks should flag arbitrary and inconsistent wage deductions as potential indicators of forced labor.

"This has been the industry's hidden secret for decades," said Gemma Tillack of the U.S.-based Rainforest Action Network, which has exposed labor abuses on palm oil plantations. "The buck stops with the banks. It is their funding that makes this system of exploitation possible."

As global demand for palm oil surges, plantations are struggling to find enough laborers, frequently relying on brokers who prey on the most at-risk people. Many foreign workers end up fleeced by a syndicate of recruiters and corrupt officials and often are unable to speak the local language, rendering them especially susceptible to trafficking and other abuses.

They sometimes pay up to \$5,000 just to get their jobs, an amount that could take years to earn in their home countries, often showing up for work already crushed by debt. Many have their passports seized by company officials to keep them from running away, which the United Nations recognizes as a potential flag of forced labor.

Countless others remain off the books and are especially scared of speaking out. They include migrants working without documentation and children who AP reporters witnessed squatting in the fields like crabs, picking up loose fruit alongside their parents. Many women also work for free or on a day-to-day basis, earning the equivalent of as little as \$2 a day, sometimes for decades.

The AP is not identifying most of the workers or their specific plantations to protect their safety, based on previous instances of retaliation. Many of the interviews took place secretly in homes or coffeeshops in towns and villages near the plantations, sometimes late at night.

The Malaysian government was contacted by the AP repeatedly over the course of a week, but issued no comment. Felda also did not respond, but its commercial arm, FGV Holdings Berhad, said it had been working to address workers' complaints on its own plantations, including making improvements in recruitment practices and ensuring that foreign laborers have access to their passports.

Indonesians such as Jum make up the vast majority of palm oil workers worldwide, including in Malaysia, where most locals shun the dirty, low-paying jobs. The two nations share a similar language and a porous border, but their close ties do not guarantee safe employment.

Unable to find a job at home, Jum says he went to Malaysia in 2013, signing a contract through an agent to work on a Fel-da plantation for three years. He endured the harsh conditions because his family needed the money, but says he asked to leave as soon as his time was up. Instead, he says, his contract was extended twice against his will.

He says he initially was housed with other Indonesians in a crude metal shipping container, sweltering in the tropical heat. Later, his bed consisted of a bamboo mat next to a campfire, with no protection from the elements and the snakes and other deadly animals foraging in the jungle.

“Sometimes I sleep under thousands of stars, but other nights it is totally dark. The wind is very cold, like thousands of razors piercing my skin, especially during a downpour,” he says. “I feel that I was deliberately abandoned by the company. Now, my hope is only one: Get back home.”

He has lived this way too long, he tells the AP over the phone -- scared to stay, and scared to leave.

“Please help me!” he begs.

A half-century ago, palm oil was just another commodity that thrived in the tropics. Many Western countries relied on their own crops like soybean and corn for cooking, until major retailers discovered the cheap oil from Southeast Asia had almost magical qualities. It had a long shelf life, remained nearly solid at room temperature and didn’t smoke up kitchens, even when used for deep-frying.

When researchers started warning that trans fats like those found in margarine posed serious health risks, demand for palm oil soared even higher.

Just about every part of the fruit is used in manufacturing, from the outer flesh to the inner kernel, and the versatility of the oil itself and its derivatives seem endless.

It helps keep oily substances from separating and turns instant noodles into steaming cups of soup, just by adding hot water. It’s used in baby formula, non-dairy creamers and supplements and is listed on the labels of everything from Jif Natural peanut butter to Kit Kat candy bars.

Often hidden amid a list of scientific names on labels, it’s equally useful in a host of cleansers and makeup products. It bubbles in shampoo, foams in Colgate toothpaste, moisturizes Dove soap and helps keep lipstick from melting.

But the convenience comes with a cost: For workers, harvesting the fruit can be brutal.

The uneven jungle terrain is rough and sometimes flooded. The palms themselves serve as a wind barrier, creating sauna-like conditions, and harvesters need incredible strength to hoist long poles with sickles into the towering trees.

Each day, they must balance the tool while carefully slicing down spiky fruit bunches heavy enough to maim or kill, tending hundreds of trees over expanses that can stretch beyond 10 football fields. Those who fail to meet impossibly high quotas can see their wages reduced, sometimes forcing entire families into the fields to make the daily number.

“I work as a helper with my husband to pick up loose fruit. I do not get paid,” said Yuliana, who labors on a plantation owned by London Sumatra, which has a history of labor issues and is owned by one of the world’s largest instant-noodle makers.

Muhamad Waras, head of sustainability at London Sumatra, responded that wage issues and daily harvesting quotas are regularly discussed and that workers without documents are prohibited.

The AP talked to some female workers from other companies who said they were sexually harassed and even raped in the fields, including some minors.

Workers also complained about a lack of access to medical care or clean water, sometimes collecting rain runoff to wash the residue from their bodies after spraying dangerous pesticides or scattering fertilizer.

While previous media reports have mostly focused on a single company or plantation, the AP investigation is the most comprehensive dive into labor abuses industrywide.

It found widespread problems on plantations big and small, including some that meet certification standards set by the global Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, an association that promotes ethical production -- including the treatment of workers -- and whose members include growers, buyers, traders and environmental watchdogs.

Some of the same companies that display the RSPO’s green palm logo signifying its seal of approval are accused of continuing to grab land from indigenous people and destroying virgin rainforests that are home to orangutans and other critically endangered species. They contribute to climate change by cutting down trees, draining carbon-rich peatlands and using illegal slash-and-burn clearing that routinely blankets parts of Southeast Asia in a thick haze.

When asked for comment, some product manufacturers acknowledged the industry’s history of labor and environmental problems, and all said they do not tolerate any human rights abuses, including unpaid wages and forced labor. Most stressed they were working toward obtaining only ethically sourced palm oil, pushing governments to make systemic changes, and taking immediate steps to investigate when alerted to troubling issues and suspending relationships with palm oil producers that fail to address grievances.

Nestle, Unilever and L'Oréal were among the companies that noted they had stopped purchasing directly from Felda or its commercial affiliate, FGV. Eliminating tainted palm oil is difficult, however, because labor problems are so endemic and most big buyers are dependent on a tangled network of third-party suppliers.

While some companies, such as Ikea, Colgate-Palmolive and Unilever, directly confirmed the use of palm oil or its derivatives in their products, others refused to say or provided minimal information, sometimes even when “palm oil” was clearly listed on labels. Others said it was difficult to know if their products contained the ingredient because, in items such as cosmetics and cleaning supplies, some names listed on labels could instead be derived from coconut oil or a synthetic form.

“I understand why companies are struggling because palm oil has such a bad reputation,” said Didier Bergeret, director of social sustainability at the Consumer Goods Forum, a global industry group. “Even if it’s sustainable, they don’t feel like talking about it whatsoever.”

In response to the criticism, Malaysia and Indonesia have long touted the golden crop as vital to alleviating poverty, saying small-time farmers are able to grow their own palm oil and large industrial estates provide much-needed jobs to workers from poor areas.

Nageeb Wahab, head of the Malaysian Palm oil Association, a government-supported umbrella group, called the allegations against the industry unwarranted. He noted that all the companies in his association, which are most of the country’s mid- and larger operations, must meet certification standards.

“I am surprised with all the allegations made. All of them are not true,” he said. “There may be violations by some, but definitely it is isolated and not from our members’ plantations.”

But Soes Hindharno, spokesman for the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, told the AP that many Indonesian workers who cross over to Malaysia illegally to work on plantations “are easily intimidated, their wages are cut or they are threatened with reporting and deportation.” Some have their passports seized by their employers, he said.

He added that many of the concerns raised by AP about labor conditions in Indonesia had not been brought to his level, but said any company found not following government rules and regulations could face sanctions, including having their operations shut down.

The AP traveled to Jum’s Felda plantation in Malaysia earlier this year to meet with him, but calls to his cell phone went unanswered. Fellow workers confirmed he no longer slept in the barracks and instead, vulnerable with no identity papers, had to hide from the police.

Jum's co-workers at least had a roof covering their heads, but their shelter resembled a barn. The filthy kitchen had a hotplate and just a few pots and pans. Only two outdoor squat toilets were functional, forcing many men to share, and a mold-covered cement trough served as a communal basin for washing. Pesticide sprayers were stacked along the metal walls, just feet from their bunks.

The men said they were forced to work unpaid overtime every day. One complained of abdominal pain, saying he was too sick to go to the fields and had been asking the company to give him back his passport so he could return home. He said he was told he must pay more than \$700 to leave – money he did not have.

“We work until we are dying,” said a worker sitting in a room with two other colleagues. Their eyes filled with tears after learning Felda was one of the world's largest palm oil producers.

“They use this palm oil to make all these products,” he said. “It makes us very sad.”

And the global pandemic has only complicated matters, limiting the flow of workers and contributing to even greater labor shortages in Malaysia.

The workers AP interviewed came from Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, the Philippines and Cambodia, along with Myanmar, which represents the newest army of exploited laborers.

Among the latter are stateless Rohingya Muslims such as Sayed.

Decades of oppression and outbreaks of violence have sent nearly a million Rohingya fleeing Myanmar in the last five years. Sayed was among those who escaped by boat -- only to be held hostage, he said, and tortured by human traffickers in a jungle camp in Thailand.

After his relatives paid a ransom, Sayed said he was sent to Muslim-majority Malaysia, where thousands of Rohingya have sought refuge. He heard about a job paying workers without permits the equivalent of \$14 a day, so he jumped into the back of a truck with eight other men and watched for hours as the busy highways narrowed to a dirt mountain track surrounded by an endless green carpet of palm oil trees.

Once on the plantation, Sayed said he lived in an isolated lean-to, dependent on his boss to bring what little rice and dried fish he was given to eat. He said he escaped after working a month and was later arrested, spending a year and a half in an immigration detention center, where guards beat him.

“There is no justice,” he said. “People here say, ‘This is not your country, we will do whatever we want.’”

Shamshu, who also is Rohingya, said he, too, made a run from his plantation after realizing he would never get paid. But that didn't end his troubles.

Shamshu had a U.N.-issued refugee card, which can provide some protection even though Malaysia does not recognize it as a legal document, but he and others said it's common for authorities to tear them up. He said he was stopped by police and spent four months in prison and then six months in an immigration detention center, where he was flogged.

During one beating, he described how a guard smashed his face against a wall, while two others pinned his arms and legs. Similar stories were repeated to the AP by several other migrant workers, including Vannak Anan Prum, a Cambodian who published a graphic novel in 2018 depicting his abuse.

"There is still a scar ... and I still have pain," Shamshu said of his caning. "I think it was connected to electricity because I passed out."

In some of the worst cases of abuse, migrant workers said they fled one kind of servitude for another, detailing how they were trafficked, sold and enslaved not once, but twice.

Five men from Cambodia and Myanmar told the AP strikingly similar stories about being forced to work on Thai fishing boats for years at different times. They said they managed to break free while docking in Sarawak, Malaysia, before being scooped up by police and quickly sold again onto plantations.

"In Cambodia, I often heard my parents talking about the hardship of their lives under the Khmer Rouge regime, but I myself have met this hardship, too, when I worked at the Thai fishing boat and at the Malaysian palm oil plantation," said Sren Brohim, 48, who escaped by offering to fish for free in exchange for a boat ride home. "Working at these two places was like working in hell."

Rights groups confirmed being double-trafficked is not uncommon, especially five to 10 years ago, when recruiters and human traffickers would wait along the coast for runaway fishermen.

Last year in Malaysia, another Cambodian man who said he spent five years enslaved at sea and four more on plantations was among those who surfaced. Instead of being repatriated as a victim of human trafficking, rights groups said he was jailed for months for being in the country illegally.

A Burmese man, Zin Ko Ko Htwe, said he also was brought to a plantation after escaping from a boat in 2008 and spent several months working there, without being paid. He decided to run one day, but said his supervisors chased him down, pulled out a gun and surrounded him.

"Come out!" he recalled them yelling. "If you don't, we will kill you!"

Ko Htwe was taken back to the plantation, where he said his bosses tied his hands together and, at gunpoint, told him to kneel before the other workers as a warning. He eventually managed to escape, but didn't make it home until 2016 -- nearly a decade after he left.

"We gave our sweat and blood for palm oil," Ko Htwe said. "We were forced to work and were abused."

When Americans and Europeans see palm oil is listed as an ingredient in their snacks, he said, they should know "it's the same as consuming our sweat and blood."

The palm industry's dominance is perhaps best grasped by viewing its footprint from 35,000 feet in the air. Trees planted in neat rows stretch across miles of flatlands in both countries, straddling coffee-colored rivers and eventually ringing terraced mountains for as far as the eye can see, creating a patchwork of green nearly the size of Kansas.

It's easy to understand the allure, considering that crops like rapeseed, sesame and corn require a lot more land while producing far less oil.

Malaysia and Indonesia started ramping up commercial production in the 1960s and '70s, supported by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which saw palm oil as an engine for economic growth in the developing world. Today, following advances in transportation and capabilities in refining, the two countries have a near-monopoly on the global supply, even as production expands across Africa and Latin America, where a litany of labor abuses also have been reported.

China and India have become major customers, and the crop now is being eyed as a potential energy source for power plants, ships and airplanes, which would create even more demand.

"If the whole Western world would stop using palm oil, I don't think that would make any difference," said Gerrit van Duijn, a former refineries manager at Unilever, one of the world's largest palm oil buyers for food and personal care products.

The trees take only three or four years to mature and then bear fruit year-round for up to three decades. But most companies can't maintain the pace of expansion without outside funding. Every 10,000 acres of new planting requires up to \$50 million, van Duijn estimates.

Asian banks are by far the most robust financiers of the plantations, but Western lenders and investment companies have poured almost \$12 billion into palm oil plantations in the last five years alone, allowing for the razing and replanting of ever-expanding tracts of land, according to Forest and Finance, a database run by six nonprofit organizations that track money flowing to palm oil companies. The U.S. institutions BNY Mellon, Charles Schwab

Corp., Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase & Co., and Citigroup Inc., along with Europe's HSBC, Standard Chartered, Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse and Prudential, together account for \$3.5 billion of that, according to the data.

Other contributors include U.S. state pensions and teachers' unions, including CalPERS, California's massive public employees fund, and insurance companies such as State Farm, meaning that even conscientious consumers many unwittingly be supporting the industry just by visiting ATMs, mortgaging homes, insuring cars or investing in 401K retirement accounts.

Bank of America, HSBC, Standard Chartered, Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse, CalPERS and State Farm responded by noting their policies vowing to support sustainability practices in the palm oil industry, with many also incorporating human rights into their guidelines. JPMorgan Chase declined comment, and BNY Mellon, Citigroup and Prudential did not respond. Charles Schwab called its investment "small."

Some, including Norway's government pension -- the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, worth about \$1 trillion -- have divested or distanced themselves from palm oil companies in recent years.

But Norway and many big-name banks and financial institutions around the globe continue to maintain ties with Malaysia's biggest bank, Malayan Banking Berhad. More commonly known as Maybank, it has provided almost \$4 billion in financing to Southeast Asia's palm oil industry between 2015 and 2020, or about 10 percent of all loans and underwriting services, according to Forests and Finance.

Though the group accuses Maybank of having some of the loosest social and environmental assessment policies in the industry, its shareholders include institutions such as the Vanguard Group, BlackRock and State Street Corp.

The biggest gains for banks affiliated with palm oil come from big-ticket financial services, such as corporate loans. But some of the same institutions also offer banking services for workers, handling payrolls and installing ATM machines inside plantations.

"And this is where banks, such as Maybank, may find themselves at the heart of a forced-labor problem," said Duncan Jepson, managing director of the global anti-trafficking nonprofit group Liberty Shared. "Financial institutions have ethical and contractual obligations to all their clients, as set out in the customer charters. In this case, that means both the palm oil company and its workers."

Jepson said abnormal paycheck deductions are commonplace industry-wide, which should trigger investigations by the banks' risk management teams into possible money-laundering.

In a statement, Maybank expressed surprise at the criticism of its standards, saying that “we reject any insinuation that Maybank may be involved in any unethical behavior.” The bank said it had not received any complaints about worker paychecks and “does not arbitrarily make deductions to client accounts unless instructed or authorized to do so by the account holder.” It said it would immediately investigate any complaints brought forward. It also pushed back against allegations that it has loose social governance standards.

Asked for comment on their investments, BlackRock reiterated its commitment to sustainable practices, Vanguard said it monitors companies in its portfolio for human rights abuses, and State Street did not respond.

Jepson’s organization filed a petition with the U.S. government earlier this year, citing allegations of child and forced labor, and seeking a ban on all palm oil imports from Sime Darby Plantation. The giant Malaysian-based producer told the AP that it has taken several steps to address labor concerns, including setting up a multilingual worker helpline. Two similar petitions were filed last year by other groups against FGV Holding, Felda’s commercial arm.

FGV Holdings, which employs nearly 30,000 foreign workers and manages about 1 million acres, has a 50/50 joint-venture with American consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble Company. FGV Holdings has been under fire for labor abuses and was sanctioned by the RSPO certification group two years ago.

Nurul Hasanah Ahamed Hassain Malim, FGV’s head of sustainability, noted that while the company is striving to make improvements, the issues raised stretch beyond just FGV and that the government also should play a role in protecting migrant workers.

“It is an industry issue. And I would say that it’s not only specific to plantations -- you would see that in other sectors as well,” she said.

Several workers at different companies, including Jum’s plantation, showed the AP their pay stubs and ledgers documenting daily wages. Some noted they were regularly docked for not meeting quotas or shorted on their salaries every month, sometimes for years, to pay off the brokers who recruited them. In one case, more than 40 percent was subtracted from a Malaysian employee’s earnings, including a deduction for electricity.

Some months, Jum and the others said they made as little as \$10 a day. Most labored the same hours, doing identical jobs, but said they never knew what amount to expect until checking the Maybank accounts where their salaries were deposited each month.

Karim, a Bangladeshi worker who arrived in Malaysia legally 12 years ago after being promised a position in an electronics company, said he wound up working for a subcontractor on many large plantations owned by the biggest companies.

“I have been cheated five times in six years,” he said, adding that once when he asked for his unpaid wages, his boss “threatened to run me over with his car.”

Many of these conditions should not be a surprise to companies buying palm oil and those helping finance the plantations.

The U.S. State Department has long linked the palm oil industry in Malaysia and Indonesia to exploitation and trafficking. And a 2018 report released by the Consumer Goods Forum found indicators of forced labor on estates in both countries -- essentially putting the network’s 400 CEOs on alert. Its members include palm oil customers like Nestle, General Mills Inc., PepsiCo Inc., Colgate-Palmolive Company and Johnson & Johnson.

Many large suppliers have pledged to root out labor abuses after pressure from buyers who have denounced it. But some workers said they are told to hide or coached on what to say during auditors’ scheduled visits when only the best conditions are often showcased for sustainability certification.

It’s a system that keeps those like Jum from ever being seen.

Soon after his phone call with the AP pleading for help, Jum decides to slip away from his plantation, without even telling his friends goodbye. Instead, he sends them an abrupt text saying he’s had enough and will try to find an illegal boat home to Indonesia.

It’s a dangerous plan. The risk of getting caught or dying at sea is all too real. He could simply disappear.

Days pass with no word. But finally, Jum emerges: He has reached the Malaysian coast, but doesn’t have enough money to pay smugglers for the trip home. He is huddled in a small metal hut to avoid being spotted, wiping away tears and running his hands through thick tangles of black hair.

“If I get caught,” he tells the AP on a video call, “I’m afraid that I will not be able to see my mother again.”

Jum is hiding in a popular corridor for migrants without papers, and authorities are aggressively patrolling the area. Smooth-talking brokers also are on the hunt, waiting to pounce on vulnerable workers and promising safe passage for a price that often climbs once a trip begins.

Jum has always shielded his family from his troubles and the thought of turning to them for help fills him with shame. But as the days continue, he has no choice: He makes the call and they borrow the money needed to finally bring him home.

When it's time to go, Jum spends the night in the forest with a group of fellow Indonesians also nervous about the risky crossing. He readies himself to plunge into the disorienting blackness of the South China Sea before dawn to swim to the waiting boat, one of the most treacherous legs of the journey.

Once Jum climbs aboard, totally spent, he quickly realizes to his horror that the man who extracted \$600 in exchange for transport all the way to his village has disappeared. He tries to ask what happened, but is silenced and told to hand over his phone unless he wants it tossed into the water.

"No questions!" the captain screams at him. "Do you want to live or die?"

Jum spends the journey relentlessly scanning the water for lights from border patrol vessels that could catch them as the boat is slammed by waves powerful enough to capsize it. He doesn't relax until he touches Indonesian sand.

He is safe. But he also is broke, and his family remains thousands of miles away. He looks for work, but no one will hire him without proper identification papers -- his Indonesian ID card, which says he is 32, expired years ago -- so he relies on strangers for food and shelter.

After a stretch of silence, Jum finally reaches out to the AP again -- crying, wracked with hunger. The AP asks if he wants to be put in touch with the local International Organization for Migration office, which takes him to a shelter and designates him as a victim of trafficking. He is quarantined due to a mounting number of coronavirus cases until at last -- three months after fleeing his plantation -- he is placed on a plane home.

His excitement at seeing his family is muted by the humiliation he feels returning empty-handed after working on the plantation for seven years. But it doesn't matter to them.

"For my parents, the most important thing was that I came back home safe and healthy," he says. "I felt so relieved when my feet stepped back in my home village. It's a great relief, like someone who just escaped punishment. ... I feel like a free man!"

With just an elementary school education, Jum's only job now is tending a neighbor's rice fields for almost no money. It's a problem many migrant workers face: Are their families better off when they're away? At least then there's one less mouth to feed, and they're able to send a little cash home.

Brokers often jump on those who have returned home to such little opportunity, trying to lure them away again with renewed promises of riches.

So it's no surprise when the phone call comes from an agent in Malaysia who already has obtained Jum's new number.

Come back, the agent assures him. Things will be better this time. Just come back.

Associated Press reporters Sopheng Cheang and Gemunu Amarasinghe contributed to this report.

Copyright 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.