

7 Thais Enter Guilty Pleas For Detention In Sweatshop

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Body

Seven people accused of luring dozens of garment workers from Thailand and keeping them in virtual slavery at a clandestine factory in suburban Los Angeles **pleaded guilty** on Friday to violating Federal civil rights laws.

The seven, all Thai citizens, signed **plea** agreements with the United States Attorney's office that will result in prison terms ranging from two to seven years.

Last August, state and Federal agents raided a garment factory in suburban El Monte and found 72 Thai immigrants confined in a compound ringed with razor wire and spiked fences.

The authorities said many had been held against their will, forced to toil day and night for less than \$2 an hour. Some were told that they had to repay the cost of transporting them from Thailand, yet their imprisonment continued after the "debt" was repaid.

The operators of the El Monte **sweatshop** admitted to conspiracy, harboring illegal aliens, forcing workers into involuntary servitude and labor and civil rights violations.

Those **pleading guilty** included Suni Manasurangkun, 66, identified as the ringleader, and her sons Wirachai, 37, Surachai, 39, and Phanasak, 34. Two other sons believed to have been involved in the **sweatshop** operations have been declared fugitives.

Guilty pleas were also agreed to by Sunthon Rawangchaisong, 31, and Seri Kanchakphairi, 29, who were hired to guard the workers, and Rampha Sathaprasit, 34, described as a lieutenant in the operation. All seven are to be sentenced in April and May.

Prosecutors said Suni Manasurangkun and her sons managed the **sweatshop**, recruiting workers among the poor in Thailand, providing them with false passports and confining them to a windowless warehouse where they worked long hours for little pay.

The case underscored the problem of abuse in the garment industry. It prompted the Labor Department to notify more than a dozen of the country's largest retailers that goods made by immigrants working in such factories may have ended up in their stores.

Sweatshop Watch, a coalition supporting the workers, said many of them continued to suffer from serious medical problems caused by their years of imprisonment.

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Immigration officials said they would be allowed to remain in the United States for now.

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