

# Thai Police Rescue 18 Laotian Girls From Sweatshop

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BANGKOK (AP)--Thai police raided a makeshift garment factory in downtown Bangkok and rescued 18 Laotian girls who were being held as slave laborers, an official said Wednesday.

A couple that allegedly owned the factory was arrested on human trafficking and other charges, said Social Development and Human Security Minister Sora-at Klinpratoom.

Sora-at said he led the raid late Tuesday on a three-story residence that was being used as a sweatshop where the girls, aged 11 to 18 years old, were forced to work long hours producing jeans.

After a two-hour search, police found the girls locked in an underground room measuring 3-by-4 meters. The girls were placed under the care of the Social Welfare Department pending further investigation and their repatriation to Laos, Sora-at said.

The suspected factory owners, 54-year-old Somchai Phookitdee, and his wife, Nongyao, 52, were arrested on charges of human trafficking, illegal detention and illegally hiring aliens.

If found guilty, they face a penalty of up to 15 years in prison, the minister said.

The raid came after two of the girls escaped from the factory last month and complained to police, saying they were being forced to work, were poorly fed and beaten by the factory owners.

Wallop Ploythapthim, the permanent secretary of Social Development and Human Security, said the rescued girls told officials they were lured to Thailand by a Laotian woman who promised paying work, but had been held at the factory without pay since they arrived six months ago.

Thousands of workers are trafficked into Thailand each year from neighboring countries.

-Edited by Mary de Wet