Thailand’s anti-trafficking effort loses steam

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL
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The U.S. State Department is gathering information for its next Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report, due to be published in June. It ranks countries on their efforts to combat human trafficking. Thailand faces an automatic downgrade to Tier 3, the lowest rank, unless it makes “significant efforts” to improve its record, the State Department says.

In an interview with Reuters, Police Maj-Gen Chatchawal Suksomjit of the Royal Thai Police defended Thailand’s record for investigating and prosecuting traffickers and the Thai officials who help them.

Nine people have been arrested in Thailand in relation to Rohingya-smuggling so far in 2013, including two government officials, according to data provided by Chatchawal’s office. None of the arrests have led to convictions, however, and charges against one of the two officials were dropped.

The numbers suggest the enforcement is losing steam. Thailand prosecuted 27 people for trafficking in 2012, down from 67 the previous year, according to the 2013 TIP Report. Only 10 of those prosecutions – one of them an official – resulted in convictions, the report said.

Corruption among Thai law enforcement personnel allowed human trafficking to prosper, said the State Department. Thai police and immigration officials “extorted money or sex” from detainees or “sold Burmese migrants unable to pay labor brokers or sex traffickers,” the 2013 report said.

The same report urged the Department of Special Investigation (DSI), Thailand’s answer to the FBI, to “increase efforts . . . to investigate, prosecute, and convict officials engaged in trafficking-related corruption.”

When Reuters described what it learned about Rohingya trafficking to DSI chief Tarit Pengdith, he said it was the responsibility of the Thai police and military to investigate.

“The DSI has heard about cases of Rohingya being moved from immigration detention centers across Thailand to other parts of the country where they are sold to human traffickers, but we are not responsible for investigating these cases,” Tarit said.

Ultimately, the stateless Rohingya are not the police’s responsibility either, Police Maj-Gen Chatchawal said: “The Rohingya are Myanmar’s problem because they don’t want to stay in Myanmar. They are persecuted there.”

Myanmar, meanwhile, disowns them, recently rejecting a U.N. resolution urging citizenship for the Rohingya. Myanmar government spokesman Ye Htut referred to a 1982 citizenship law that effectively renders the Rohingya stateless.

“Citizenship will not be granted to those who are not entitled to it under the law no matter who applies pressure on us,” he said.