The Snake from Fujian Province to Morecambe Bay: An Analysis of the Problem of Human Trafficking in Sweated Labour

Harald Haugom Olsen
Administrative Officer in the Norwegian National Bureau of Crime Investigation

1. Introduction: The Tragedy at Morecambe Bay

On a cold and rainy afternoon, 5 February 2004, 35 Chinese women and men picking cockles on the sands of Hestbank in Morecambe Bay were cut off from the shore by the rising tide. The Chinese cockle pickers were one to two miles from the shore when the tide was turning. Losing their direction in the dark and with the tide quickly filling the channel behind them, they got trapped with water on every side. Many of them could not swim and some had never even seen the sea before they started picking cockles. When the police and rescue team finally arrived it was already too late. Only ten people survived the tragedy. Twenty-one people were found dead, but the police believed that two more people drowned that night. Their bodies have never been found.1 Twenty of the victims were from the Fujian province.

While the Chinese cockle pickers were fighting for their lives, their gangmaster, Lin Liang Ren, was sitting safely in his car on the shore, doing little to help his drowning workers. He later tried to flee the scene, escaping his responsibility, but was arrested the same night. In the aftermath of the tragedy Lin tried to intimidate the survivors to lie to the police and put the blame on two of those who died.

1) On Sunday 23 July 2006 human remains were found near the site of the Morecambe Bay cockling disaster. The remains, ‘basically bones’, were passed on the pathologist to be tested. See ‘Bones Found at Tragic Cockle Site,’ Daily Post, 27 July 2006. The discovery was also reported in the national press: ‘Bones on Beach,’ The Daily Telegraph, 27 July 2006; ‘Missing Cocklers,’ The Times, 28 July 2006.