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## Once-enslaved garment workers continue fight

By Hector Gonzalez, Staff Writer

Posted: 08/02/2010 05:01:48 AM PDT

The temperature that night was about the same as it's been recently - cool, around 65 degrees. It was just before dawn, around 4 a.m. Aug. 2, 1995, and a unique task force of local, state and federal officials and Thai community workers and translators was gathered inside a Yum Yum Donuts in El Monte going over the entry plan.

For three years, state Department of Industrial Relations inspectors watched the ordinary looking, stuccoed apartments on Santa Anita Avenue, two blocks from the doughnut shop. Finally they had enough evidence for a search-war rant raid on the suspected clandestine garment shop.

As the sky began to lighten, U.S. marshals, El Monte police officers, officials from three different state and federal labor-related

agencies and a Thai logistics team swooped in on the seven-unit complex. Two guards at the locked front gate gave no resistance.



Razor wire is suspended over a corner of a prison-like apartment complex in El Monte on Aug. 4, 1995. Federal and state agents raided the complex two days earlier after finding out about slave labor conditions at an illegal sweatshop there. (Associated Press)

Moving quickly from unit to unit, officials found all of the apartments locked from the outside; marshals used hammers to break them open. At the last apartment at the rear of the fenced-in complex they found and arrested the seven Thai operators of the sweat shop.

As she followed along with authorities - and with confusion and panic quickly breaking out among the occupants - Chanchanit "Chancee" Martorell, executive director of the Thai Community Development Center, was stunned by what she was seeing. Tears began streaming down her seven Thai operators of the sweatshop.

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Thai Community Development Center, was stunned by what she was seeing. Tears began streaming down her face.

"We knew there were clan destine sweatshops all over L.A. where Thai workers were being exploited, but I had no idea - I was not prepared at all for what I saw at the El Monte compound," she said.

Boxes and piles of fabric and clothing filled the apartments. There were sewing stations in most of the rooms. Workers were packed into the units, their beds lined up in rows. Windows were boarded and razor wire topped the fence out side - all to keep the workers prisoners.

There was even a store of sorts, a small shed covered in blue plastic sheeting, where the workers could buy toiletries and other essentials.

"They had it so highly organized - systemized. It was like a Nazi concentration camp," Martorell said. "I couldn't believe this could be happen ing in our country, in our own backyard."

#### Panic in the apartments

The 72 Thai seamstresses found living in the apartments were terrified. Slowly, as their stories began to emerge, they told of being held as slaves at the sweatshop, forced to work 18-hour days, seven days a week; of being beaten and having their families back home threatened. Some had been held for seven years.

A day before the raid, T.K. Kim, deputy state labor com missioner, met with Martorell, who agreed to go along to pro vide housing and other services for the released workers - and on the condition that immigration officials would not be involved.

Now Martorell was desperately trying to calm the Thai women, reassuring them they would be helped, not deported, and had nothing to fear. That proved to be a broken promise, but through no fault of Martorell.

"I stayed until about noon, then I left to work on arranging shelter for them, and of course we had to arrange transportation to get them there," she said.

Unknown to her, however, authorities at the scene called in immigration. By the time Martorell learned of it, the 72 workers had been loaded onto buses and driven to the federal detention center in downtown L.A. - in shackles. Their ordeal was yet far from over.

It took Martorell, with the aid of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center in Los Angeles and other organizations, nine days to convince a judge to release the workers into the custody of her Thai social services agency.

"We finally convinced them to allow them to be released on signature bonds, so we gathered all our friends, associates, everyone we could think of. In the end we got about 50 people to sign for their release," she said.

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But there was still more obstacles facing them, including threat of deportation. As Martorell was struggling to convince the workers to stay and help convict their captors, Thai consulate officials were telling them it would be better for them if they simply went home quietly and not raise a fuss.

"They wanted to sweep the whole thing under a rug," Martorell recalled. "I was furious." That's when Rotchana Cheunchujit decided to speak up. She told her fellow workers that she, for one, had nothing else to lose and would fight to remain to testify against the seven sweatshop owners. It was enough, Martorell said, to convince most in the group.

"At first I was totally confused. I had no idea what was going on," Cheunchujit said. "You see, while we were held at the compound they tried to isolate us. They never allowed us to speak to each other.

"I was in Unit G, at the back of the complex, so we were the last to be freed. We didn't know what would be next for us. When I found Chancee I just clung onto her."

Recalling an ugly past

Cheunchujit, now Rotchana Sussman, sat with her 17-year-old daughter under the little white patio outside her house on a shady street in eastern Pasadena as a breeze rustled the trees and the San Gabriel Mountains loomed in the

background.

Fifteen years after her three-year-long ordeal at the El Monte sweatshop, Sussman, who prefers to be called Na, is married. She and her husband, a college professor, have a 9-year-old. Her older son - who Na also was able to bring with her daughter from Thailand as she vowed when she left in 1992 - attends summer classes at Pasadena City College.

Like all of the workers, Na was promised a visa and a good paying job by the sweatshop's operators. The trip and all expenses could be worked off from a small portion of her earnings, they told her. Once she arrived at the El Monte complex, Na realized she had walked into a nightmare.

"We were kept locked in our rooms. We were not allowed to leave the units. There were 14 of us crowded inside. It was dusty. A lot of the workers became sick, and some of them developed tuberculosis."


In the end, all of the Thai workers, including 10 who had escaped from the compound before the raid, stayed and testified and helped to convict the sweatshop owners, who received sentences ranging from two to eight years in federal prison.

Most of the workers became U.S. citizens in 2008. They voted in their first presidential election. By remaining and speaking out, they cast an intense spotlight on garment industry exploitation, said attorney Julie Su of the Asian

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Pacific American Legal Center. They did even more. "They changed the law," she said.

In California, the El Monte case helped spur passage of A.B. 633, which holds garment manufacturers responsible for ensuring their clothing isn't made under sweatshop conditions, Su said.

Today her life is so different Na finds it hard to remember the person she was before.

She's testified at hearings in Sacramento and Washington, and continues to speak to groups fascinated by the story of the Thai slaves. Na volunteers at the Thai community center and attends protest rallies against labor exploitation, which is still a big problem, she says.

The former slave is now an American civil rights crusader. "I am not the same person of 15 years ago," she says. "Now, I am hungry for justice. Some times I have to tell my husband, 'Honey, can you please watch the kids, I have to go to a rally.' "

Hector Gonzalez is city editor of the Pasadena Star-News. He reported on the story of the El Monte sweatshop slaves 15 years ago.

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