

# SPAIN: GATEWAY FOR IMPORTED SQUID FROM MILE 201

New EJF investigation exposes human rights abuses and ecological crisis in the Southwest Atlantic squid fishery

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Each year, as Argentine shortfin squid (*Illex argentinus*), a cornerstone of the Southwest Atlantic ecosystem and economy, migrates out of Argentina's waters, hundreds of distant-water vessels plunder the stock in an area known as Mile 201. **A new investigation** by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) reveals that industrial exploitation is driving this keystone species towards collapse while exposing workers to horrific human rights abuses.

Spain is the world's second-largest importer of squid and cuttlefish – and the main entry point into the EU – giving it a pivotal role in shaping this global trade. The findings of EJF's new investigation were released today in Spain in a **dedicated report** and **film**, showing how tainted squid enters the country with direct implications for consumers, seafood markets, and the national fleet.

The squid from unregulated fisheries in the Southwest Atlantic (*Illex argentinus* or *pota argentina*) reaches Spain through the ports of Valencia, Bilbao, Vigo, Algeciras, and Barcelona, destined both for domestic consumption and re-export across the EU. On 1 September, EJF unveiled **a 350 m<sup>2</sup> billboard** in central Madrid to raise awareness of the campaign and underline the link between imported squid and abuses at sea.

EJF's multi-year investigation includes **169 interviews with Indonesian and Filipino crew aboard squid vessels**, at-sea work with the Argentine Coast Guard to monitor distant-water fleets in Mile 201, and the analysis of satellite imagery of the fleet, so vast that it is visible from space. The evidence reveals extensive human rights violations and accounts of forced labour: physical violence, intimidation, excessive working hours, and unlawful wage deductions. Almost two-thirds of Chinese squid vessels were linked to deaths or physical assaults on board. Crew also described illegal fishing practices, including shark finning, concealing vessel identification, and the deliberate killing of marine mammals such as South American fur seals.

Between 2019 and 2024, fishing hours by Chinese squid vessels in the region rose by 85%, even as landings showed alarming signs of decline. By contrast, around 30 Spanish trawlers also operate in the Southwest Atlantic – under strict EU and national rules, with onboard observers and management plans approved by authorities. The influx of products from unregulated fisheries into Spain creates unfair competition for these compliant vessels.

As the world's second-largest importer of squid and cuttlefish, and the main entry point into the EU, Spain has a pivotal role to play in driving transparency and sustainability in global seafood trade. EJF's report stresses that Spain is not only exposed to these high-risk products, but also has the responsibility and opportunity to lead an international response against overfishing, illegal practices, and modern slavery at sea.

“Spain cannot remain the gateway for seafood products tainted by labour abuse, overfishing and illegal fishing practices,” said Jesús Urios Culiñez, ocean policy officer at EJF. “We are calling on the Spanish government to strengthen import controls, starting with the Argentine shortfin squid, to swiftly implement the principles of the Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency, and to use its strategic position within the EU to drive broader international change. This is about human rights, sustainability, and fair competition for our fleet.”

“Without urgent action, we are heading for disaster,” said Steve Trent, CEO and Founder of the Environmental Justice Foundation. “Overfishing and climate breakdown are placing enormous pressure on this keystone species, while those responsible - primarily from China - commit shocking human rights abuses with impunity. A collapse could happen extremely rapidly, triggering cascading impacts on marine life. Governments must act now to bring regulation, transparency and accountability to this lawless fishery.”

### **EJF calls on Spain to urgently :**

- + **Review and strengthen import controls for squid**, focusing on species linked to unregulated fisheries, starting with the Argentine shortfin squid.
- + **Apply and expand**, in coordination with the European Commission, **risk verification criteria** in the EU IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) regulation to cover unregulated fisheries.
- + **Increase verification requests, inspections and investigations** of squid shipments where risks of illegal fishing or forced labour are high.
- + **Prevent “control shopping”** in the EU by ensuring harmonised oversight across all Member States.
- + **Enhance operational cooperation** between Spanish control authorities and Spanish-flagged vessels operating in the Southwest Atlantic.
- + **Improve transparency and accountability** of squid fishing activities, including through endorsement and implementation of the **Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency**.

Spain is in a unique position to lead by example. These measures are critical to prevent seafood products linked to forced labour and illegal fishing practices from entering its market and the wider EU market.

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## **ABOUT EJF**

Our work to secure environmental justice aims to protect our global climate, ocean, forests, wetlands, wildlife and defend the fundamental human right to a secure natural environment, recognising that all other rights are contingent on this. EJF works internationally to inform policy and drive systemic, durable reforms to protect our environment and defend human rights. We investigate and expose abuses and support environmental defenders, Indigenous peoples, communities, and independent journalists on the frontlines of environmental injustice. Our campaigns aim to secure peaceful, equitable and sustainable futures. Our investigators, researchers, filmmakers, and campaigners work with grassroots partners and environmental defenders across the globe.