



UNIAP

UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY
PROJECT ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

PRESS RELEASE

MEKONG COUNTRIES BUILD REGIONAL CAPACITY TO COMBAT TRANSNATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Ayutthaya, 19th June 2009 – According to the UN, there are an estimated 2.5 million trafficked persons worldwide, with a concentration in the Asia and Pacific region, and traffickers are making illicit profits estimated at \$31 billion US dollars. In response, representatives from the six countries of the Mekong region have joined forces in a week-long training in Ayutthaya, Thailand, to strengthen their collective efforts to combat the transnational crime of human trafficking.

The regional training, with government and law enforcement officials, members of judiciaries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and victim support agencies, is one of the flagship initiatives of the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Human Trafficking (COMMIT) Process. COMMIT is led by the governments of Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, in a formal alliance to combat human trafficking. The United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) acts as Secretariat to the COMMIT Process, which receives broad support from a wide range of inter-agency partners such as IOM, ILO, World Vision, UNICEF, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Australian Government-funded Asia Regional Trafficking in Persons Project (ARTIP).

In 2004, the COMMIT countries signed a historic Memorandum of Understanding at the Ministerial level, pledging solidarity and action on sustained and targeted efforts to fight human trafficking. It is the only agreement of its kind in the world. This regional counter-trafficking training is an integral part of these efforts, strengthening capacity to identify indicators of trafficking and exploitation; investigate the crimes and the criminals involved; screen and protect victims; identify and reduce risk factors; and strengthen cross-border systems for cooperation.

Several participants in this week's training shared their views and perspectives:

"Trafficking is a transnational crime that requires transnational dialogue and action," says a Chinese Government official attending the training. "It is only by meeting with our counterparts from other countries in the region that we can gather the information we need to combat human trafficking in our region."

Police Lieutenant Colonel Chachvan Bunmee from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) of Thailand's Ministry of Justice emphasizes the importance of involving many different actors in combating trafficking. "In Thailand, it is the police's responsibility to conduct investigations and raids on suspected traffickers. However we often involve social workers and NGO representatives in this process, as they are able to bring essential information and expertise to the operation that the police can benefit from."

Mr Chhuon Vibol of LICADHO, a Cambodian human rights NGO, agrees. "NGOs and community support groups have to be part of this process too," he says. "NGOs and social workers are able to gather crucial information at the grassroots and community level, so we can get the real picture. This information is vital to understand the vulnerability of victims, and how best to support and protect them."

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Ms Nant Aye Aye Kyi, Deputy Director of the Supreme Court of Myanmar, expressed her appreciation for the training. “We want to see human traffickers behind bars,” she says. “People from Myanmar are often trafficked across borders to other countries. Without cooperation with these countries, and without a full understanding of their legal systems, how can the perpetrators of these horrible crimes ever be punished?”

Senior Lieutenant Colonel Mr Tran Dinh Huan, Head of the Anti-trafficking Office in Vietnam’s Ministry of Public Security highlighted the trafficking risk that the current global economic crisis might bring to vulnerable communities and families. “In Vietnam and other countries in this region, hundreds of factories have closed over the past six months, and thousands of workers have been laid off. Many of these are migrant workers who have now returned to their villages. We need to do all we can to protect workers and their families from a heightened risk of exploitation as a direct result of struggling industries.”

Mr Vannaeth Chanthavong of the Lao PDR Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare added that to prevent human trafficking, better job opportunities and an improved quality of life should be offered at home. “Laos is a source country, meaning that Lao people are trafficked to other countries. More jobs at home would create less of a need for jobs abroad.”

Human trafficking is a highly complex problem in this region due to a variety of factors. Chief among these has been poor coordination between countries and a lack of knowledge by governments about how other countries tackle the problem. Without interventions like COMMIT, human traffickers will continue to reap the benefits of this low-risk, high-profit crime, while millions of innocent victims will be left to suffer at their hands.

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