

Lao government steps up effort to combat human trafficking

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THE Lao government is stepping up its effort to combat human trafficking, ultimately aiming to eliminate it.

"The plan to combat human trafficking is considered as a priority plan of the Lao government," said the Minister of Labour and Social welfare, Mrs Onchanh Thammavong, during an interview at the national meeting to combat human trafficking held on August 21 at the International Cooperation and Training Centre.

The objective of the two-day meeting during August 21-22 is to review the implementation and achievements of measures taken against human trafficking over the past years of various sectors working relevant to combating human trafficking.

The participants are also required to share ideas to find new measures to address the remaining challenges and difficulties to reduce the issue day by day.

"The achievements of the meeting will be creating a base of data to formulate strategies to combat human trafficking in the Lao PDR to coincide with state and party policies and the government's socio-economic development plan," said Mrs Onchanh.

"Even though this issue in Laos is not as serious as in other countries, we have to take precautionary measures to limit the problem because it is a disaster for human rights," said Mrs Onchanh.

The majority of human trafficking victims are lured to work in neighbouring countries illegally, particularly in Thailand.

According to the minister, there are over 180,000 illegal workers in Thailand



Minister of Labour and Social welfare, Mrs Onchanh Thammavong gives an interview during her coffee break

and the majority of them are young innocent women and children who do not have access to information.

The minister said that the Lao government encourages workers to find work overseas, but they should do so legally, be above 18 year old, and the workers must not still be students.

"To deal with this situation, we have to mobilise people and raise awareness of the laws and regulations of the government to avoid the lure of illegal work, with the result that people are being taken advantage of," said the minister.

The UN Resident coordinator in Laos, Ms Olivia Yambi said, "To combat human trafficking effectively, we require cooperation from all sectors and a multitude of partners, including governments, United Nations organisations, NGOs and private sectors as well."

The 2003 International Labour

Organisation's (ILO) Lao PDR Migration Survey, supported by the Mekong Sub-regional Project to combat trafficking in children and women has shown that cross-border movements from Laos to other countries, especially Thailand is accelerating. It also suggests that young people, particularly girls and young women are the most vulnerable to exploitation.

The survey found that in all age group (adults included), 75 percent of total migrations have occurred within the last three years compared to less than five percent prior to 1989.

More than one in five of all Lao migrants from three provinces surveyed, in Champassak, Savannakhet and Khammuan, were under the age of 18, with girls accounting for more than two-thirds of the migrants, making this group the most vulnerable to human traffickers.

Lao girls are particularly vulnerable to cross-border traffickers and often end up in exploitative and slave-like conditions including prostitution, forced labour and domestic servitude.

Similarly, the 2004 study by the Ministry of Social and Labour Welfare and UNICEF showed that more than 60 percent of the victims were below eighteen years old and the majority of them did not complete primary school or were not able to attend school at all in a survey of all 17 provinces.

Internal trafficking was also common using the same recruitment operation, mostly for commercial sexual exploitation and factory work. Reports of violence and abuse also appeared to be common.

What is more alarming is that about 17 percent of trafficking cases were reported to be missing.