

World Day Against Child Labour

The fight against human trafficking and forced child labour

There are currently thousands of young Vietnamese children displaced in countries far around the world where they have no family, have no friends, and cannot speak the language. These children are performing forced child labour to make money they will never receive, and for people they will never meet. This reality is incomprehensible for most people and raises the question of “How did these children get from Vietnam to places as far away as Europe”? The answer is human trafficking. The World Day Against Child Labour is an important day on which organizations such as the *International Labour Organisation (ILO)* and the *United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)* collaborate to promote the fight against the exploitation of children through child labour, and its perpetuation through human trafficking.

Due to the illegal and clandestine nature of organized crime, exact figures of how many Vietnamese men, women, and children suffer at the hands of human traffickers vary but the Vietnamese government¹ has reported that since 1998, as many as 4,527 women and children have been traded. An additional 6,418 women and children who have been missing for an extended period of time are believed to have been trafficked. However, these figures only represent the people who were detected by law enforcement agencies and it is widely accepted, by international agencies and Vietnamese government departments alike, that this number only represents a very small fraction of the real number of people who are trafficked out of Vietnam. Whatever the real figure may be, it is estimated that nearly half of the total amount of trafficked persons worldwide are children who face a bleak future either through performing forced labour, sexual labour, illegal adoption, or organ removal.

Human trafficking became a serious problem in Viet Nam in the mid-1990's when women and children were taken to China and Cambodia for arranged marriages or sexual exploitation (or sent from rural to urban areas within the country to fuel the prostitution industry). As a result, there is now an organised network of human traffickers who deceive victims with promises of a better life, employment, high salaries, or marriages to rich men. Upon arrival in the foreign destination many of the victims find themselves indebted to the trafficker and this debt forces the victims to dependancy. As exploitation is the principal element of human trafficking victims often then find themselves undertaking forced labour to repay their debts. Children are particularly vulnerable to the deceptive nature of human traffickers.

The use of human trafficking as a means with which to satisfy the demand for forced labour should be of concern to society as a whole as it is not just children who become victims of human traffickers. Perpetrators of human trafficking do not discriminate between men, women, or children, but will traffic anyone from whom they can profit. The demand for trafficked human beings comes from outside Vietnam which means Vietnam is a source country from which human traffickers actively find their victims.

¹ Ministry of Public Security

It is important to recognise the link between human trafficking and child labour so that these problems can be tackled simultaneously and the relevant organizations can work together to combat the exploitation of children. Both the *ILO* and the *UNODC* identify human trafficking for child labour as a major concern in Vietnam. Amongst others things, in response to this identified concern, *UNODC* has initiated and implemented a comprehensive project to help Viet Nam combat human trafficking. Since 2003, *UNODC* has – through a project- provided support to the government in the strengthening of the legal and enforcement institutions to prevent and combat human trafficking in Viet Nam. The project’s objective is to enhance the existing mechanisms against trafficking in human beings through facilitation of networking within law enforcement and the judiciary, increasing investigation and prosecution capacities, and training of law enforcement officials. Similarly, *ILO* has recently finalised the implementation of Phase I of the “Mekong Sub-regional Project to combat trafficking of children and women for labour exploitation”. The purpose of this project is to substantially reduce trafficking in children and women for labour exploitation through the development, implementation and monitoring of effective and integrated sub-regional and national programmes and strategies. It is hoped that phase II of the project, due to commence soon, will further strengthen the foundations already put in place by *ILO*.

It is important for international organizations and the Vietnamese Government to work together to combat human trafficking which is sustaining the child labour industry with innocent children sourced from within Viet Nam. Through a collaborative international approach the cycle of poverty, human trafficking, and child labour can be defeated. Through the concentrated efforts of various United Nations agencies the eradication of child labour is within reach.