



## ***THE WAY FORWARD: HOW VIETNAM CAN STEP UP ITS FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING***

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*A group of recently rescued trafficking victims crossing from China back into Vietnam. Source: Blue Dragon Children's Foundation*

Alarms have been raised over the numerous cases of trafficking of Vietnamese people. Acknowledging the adverse impact of human trafficking on human and national security, the government of Vietnam has shown a determination to combat the crime. This article presents two sets of policy recommendations for Vietnam to better address human trafficking, including prevention measures and victim support measures.

### **The Reality of Human Trafficking in Vietnam**

Vietnam is primarily a country of origin and transit for victims of trafficking, and to a lesser degree a country of destination. Most victims are subjected to sexual

exploitation, forced marriage, forced labor, organ removal, and adoption. Three main trafficking routes that have been identified include (i) from northern Vietnam to China; (ii) from southern Vietnam to Cambodia; and (iii) from Vietnam to other countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia. High-risk groups for trafficking are women, children, and members of ethnic minority communities, such as H'mong and Thai.

In terms of numbers, there were approximately 3,500 cases involving 5,000 traffickers and 7,500 victims during the period from 2010 to June 2021. However, the actual numbers were believed to be higher than reported above. In light of technological developments, numerous traffickers have exploited web-based games and social media sites, such as Zalo (a Vietnamese messaging and calling app) and Facebook, to prey on potential victims. These traffickers entice victims through false promises of employment opportunities, marriage offers, and better living conditions.

Human trafficking has become a major problem facing Vietnam. Three factors can be attributed to the rampancy of this criminal activity. First, Vietnam's long and porous land border shared with China, Cambodia, and Laos creates a favorable condition for cross-border trafficking flourishing. Second, due to the substantial disparity in social and economic development between urban and rural areas, people residing in the latter area are particularly susceptible to human trafficking. Third, the high demand for commercial sex, marriage, and cheap labor from other countries also fuels human trafficking in Vietnam.

The impact of human trafficking is devastating as it violates human rights and freedoms. Furthermore, victims of trafficking often experience health issues, such as exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Alarmingly, the impact reaches far beyond individual victims, as human trafficking also poses a threat to national security. It undermines the rules of law, leads to the displacement of many Vietnamese nationals, and serves as a catalyst for other criminal offenses, such as but not limited to, the smuggling of weapons

and drugs, money laundering, and terrorism. As a result, the Vietnamese government refers to human trafficking as a “social evil” and is committed to eradicating this crime.

### **Vietnam’s Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking**

A range of measures have been undertaken to stop the scourge of human trafficking in Vietnam. One example is the adoption of Criminal Code No. 100/2015/QH13 (amended and supplemented by Law No. 12/2017/QH14) and the Law on Prevention and Combating of Human Trafficking No. 66/2011/QH12. While the Criminal Code criminalizes trafficking offenses and prescribes penalties, the latter law includes provisions for the prevention of trafficking, handling of violations, and protection of victims. In addition to legislation, the Vietnamese government launched four National Action Programs against Trafficking encompassing the periods of: 2004 – 2010, 2011 – 2015, 2016 – 2020, and 2021 – 2025. These programs aim at bolstering the implementation of Vietnam’s anti-trafficking laws and outlining details of national policies. At the international level, Vietnam has cooperated closely with many neighboring countries, such as Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, China, and Malaysia, as well as with ASEAN in order to prevent and control human trafficking.

Notwithstanding Vietnam’s efforts, several shortcomings in existing measures have caused the persistence of human trafficking within the country’s borders. In fact, a number of stakeholders, such as police officers, court judges, border guards, and staff at rehabilitation centers, have not received sufficient training. This has resulted in several misconduct cases reported. Another shortcoming lies in the absence of an assessment and reflection framework, which hinders the ability to evaluate the implementation process and the effectiveness of Vietnam’s anti-trafficking initiatives. There is also a problem of corruption and bribery in which several officials and public employees at the communes and villages were caught colluding with organized criminal gangs and traffickers. Consequently, numerous victims in Vietnam chose not to report their experiences and seek assistance from the police and other officials. Last but not least, returnee victims of trafficking still

face challenges in rebuilding their lives due to social stigma and inadequate government support in financial, educational, and legal aspects.

### **The Way Forward**

For Vietnam to tackle the human trafficking issue more effectively, prioritizing prevention strategies and supporting the victims is a must.

With regard to prevention strategies, the Vietnamese government and relevant agencies need to pay more attention to three areas including economic empowerment, education access, and law enforcement. Economic empowerment can be done by providing more vocational skills training, job placement assistance, and job opportunities for Vietnamese people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, the government can offer small state loans to impoverished individuals, accompanied by consultation and guidance on how to effectively utilize the loans to start their own businesses. It is also crucial to guarantee that every citizen has equal opportunities in education. To achieve this, the government should provide additional support, such as scholarship programs, school feeding programs, flexible schooling hours and systems, and free textbooks, particularly for those living in remote and mountainous areas. Moreover, it is essential to incorporate anti-trafficking laws, sex education, and migration information into school curricula. Finally, having more robust national legislation that addresses all forms of trafficking is of utmost importance. Alongside law revision, Vietnam needs to improve the enforcement of anti-trafficking laws by organizing training and knowledge transfer workshops for involved stakeholders.

In conjunction with efforts to prevent human trafficking, there is a need to enhance support measures for victims of trafficking upon their return. To begin with, all victims should have access to safe and suitable accommodations during the recovery period. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider where the victims will reside after staying in the government-run accommodation to prevent the risk of being re-trafficked. The Vietnamese government also

needs to offer medical care and psychosocial support to these victims. On that note, healthcare providers and social workers should receive training in order to understand the specific needs and specialized support required by victims of trafficking. Given the fact that trafficked returnees need to deal with various legal and administrative issues, such as civil/ birth registration and residence registration, it is also crucial to provide them with legal counseling. The aforementioned measures are proposed to help facilitate the recovery and reintegration process of victims after their return.

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