

Cambodia holds back Vietnam and Thailand in trafficking prevention

Porous borders, corruption preclude collective progress

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BANGKOK/HO CHI MINH CITY/TOKYO -- Geography has helped Thailand and Vietnam compete for a large share of investment flowing out of China. But it has also thrown a wrench in their plans as trafficking persists along Southeast Asia's porous borders, especially in their shared neighbor Cambodia.

In its latest Trafficking in Persons report, the U.S. State Department downgraded Vietnam and Cambodia to its bottom tier and put Indonesia on a watchlist. Governments fearful of losing U.S. investment and economic aid are typically motivated to aim for the first or second tiers. At risk of falling into the third tier, Thailand spent the past year improving agency coordination and prosecuting officials complicit in human trafficking.

"Whenever the U.S. talks about this, there will be feedback to the Thai government and they want to work harder," said Jaruwat Jinmonca, vice president of Immanuel Foundation, an anti-trafficking NGO based in Chiang Mai. "If the ranking's too low, the government will speed up their work."

The report came in the nick of time for Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha. In the last hours of a parliamentary censure debate last month against his government, Prayuth was able to bring Thailand's rise in the rankings to his defense. But Thailand's upgrade provided no relief to Namtip, a 15-year-old girl who spent two months in Cambodian custody after being trafficked from Thailand -- or the more than 3,300 other victims counted in the report.

"The law in each country is different," said Surachate Hakpam, assistant commissioner in charge of anti-trafficking for the Royal Thai Police. "We can help people who were trafficked into Thailand more easily than getting Thais back from overseas."



Ging, 26, borrowed money to pay her way out of a trafficked labor camp in Poipet, Cambodia.
(Photo by Francesca Regalado)

As corporate interest in environmental, social and governance issues grows, developed countries have been monitoring human rights violations. In the U.S., a law that allows for import injunctions on products made with forced labor has been in effect since 2016. The European Union is expected to announce a similar ban this year.

"Business and human rights issues are recognized as a common challenge among developed countries," said Susumu Tanaka, senior economist and leader of the business and human rights unit of the Japan External Trade Organization. As long as cases of human trafficking continue to exist, "those countries will have to consider the possibility of being left out of the global supply chain."

In Thailand, trafficking of migrants from Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia is rampant in sectors such as agriculture, food processing, fishing, tourism and entertainment. A major step forward was enforcing rules against forced labor as anti-trafficking laws. Prosecutions and convictions slowed last year, which police attribute to the COVID-19 pandemic, but investigations increased from 133 in 2020 to 188 in 2021, and are expected to double this year.

Surachate's division received a 73 million-baht (\$2 million) budget this fiscal year to address migrant labor and human trafficking. This was on top of the Royal Thai Police's 32.8 billion baht annual budget, and allocations for anti-trafficking efforts to other agencies.

But for all its efforts and resources, Thailand cannot do anything about the lack of political will and resources of its southeastern neighbor, Cambodia. Open terrain, hills and rivers make up the 817-kilometer border, making it difficult to patrol and easy to cross. Cambodia has been demoted to Tier 3 this year as endemic corruption continues to hamper anti-trafficking efforts. The port city of Sihanoukville, in particular, has become a base for syndicates that traffic people to run online scams.

Human trafficking ratings for select countries

■ Tier 1
 ■ Tier 2
 ■ Tier 3
 Watch list

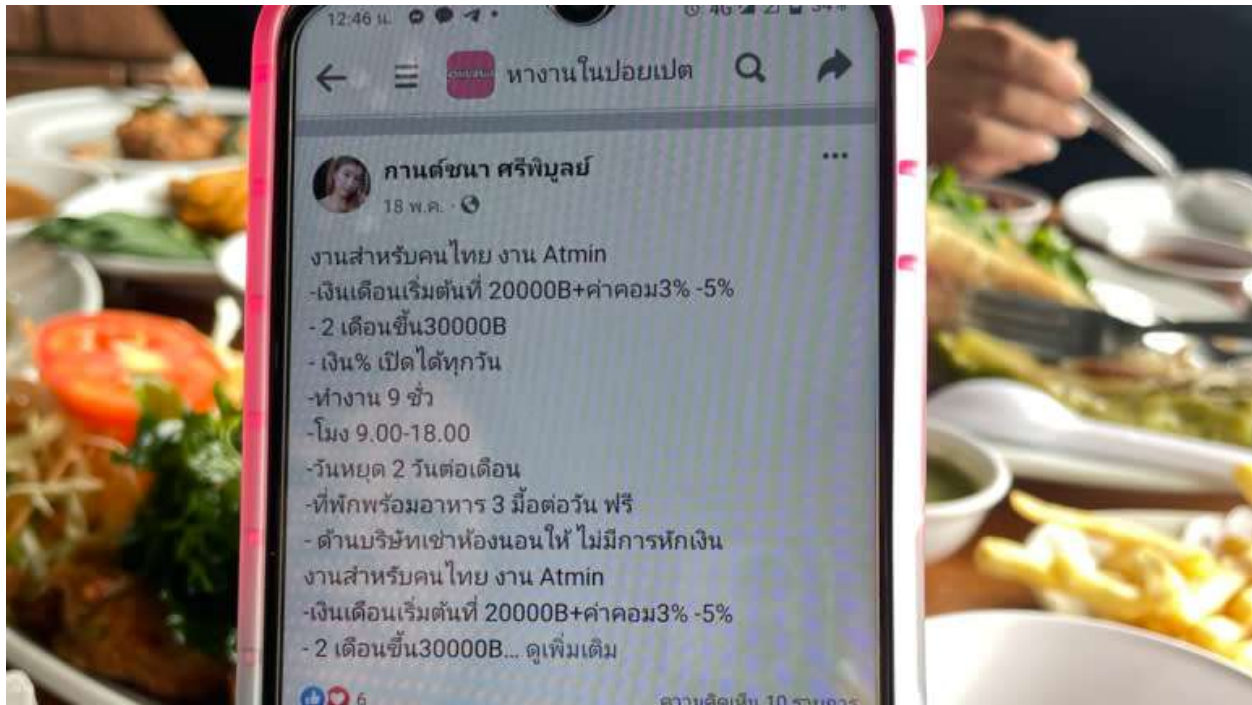
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Vietnam	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 3
Laos	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
Cambodia	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 3
Thailand	Tier 3	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
Malaysia	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 3
Singapore	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 1
Myanmar	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 3	Tier 3	Tier 3	Tier 3
Indonesia	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
Philippines	Tier 2	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 1
Japan	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 1	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2

The ranking system has three tiers, with Tier 1 being the best and Tier 3 the worst
Source: U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report

In downgrading Vietnam in the TIP report, the U.S. said the country didn't do enough to identify and help victims, while convictions of traffickers declined for five straight years. The report said some officials allegedly facilitated forced labor in Saudi Arabia, while others allegedly harassed accusers in efforts to silence them.

Vietnam said the report "contained certain inaccurate information that has not fully" reflected its increased efforts, including the enforcement of a law on guest workers, protecting children online and cooperating internationally on safe migration.

"Vietnam has been following with keen attention the situation pertaining to domestic and cross-border human trafficking, so as to come up with suitable countermeasures," said Le Thi Thu Hang, a foreign ministry spokeswoman.



Ging shows a job posting in a Facebook page run by traffickers. The page has more than 16,000 followers. (Photo by Francesca Regalado)

While Thai authorities can often identify victims and track perpetrators through bank accounts, internet data and phone records, enforcement often falls to their poorly equipped Cambodian counterparts. Immigration authorities in Poipet, the border town where 15-year-old Namtip was detained, said her case was delayed because they could not verify her identity.

Victims who spoke with Nikkei Asia said they witnessed patrols on both sides of the Thai-Cambodian border accepting bribes from traffickers for safe passage. Syndicate bosses would brag to victims about how much they paid the police for each head, the victims said.

Corruption also helps explain the situation in Sihanoukville, which has a special economic zone, in which around 100 casinos and numerous property developments are financed and operated by Chinese businessmen. Victims could easily find where they were held on a map -- large compounds with high walls and barbed wire, containing dormitories and casinos. These are often in or near urban centers, as they require high-speed internet to conduct financial scams and traffic more people.

"In the past, trafficking was done person to person. But online, you can trick a hundred people at the same time," said Surachate.

Cambodia National Police spokesman Chhay Kim Khoeun told Nikkei in December that the force is committed to its crackdown on groups kidnapping workers.



A trafficking survivor reunites with family in Vietnam, where the U.S. says limits on independent unions and free speech made it hard to discuss workers' rights and labor trafficking. (Photo courtesy of Blue Dragon Children's Foundation)

In Vietnam, the ads beckoning people to work overseas are as diverse as the destination countries, from Facebook posts and handwritten posters near the woods of Dalat touting Kuwait to printed banners for Japan on a narrow road outside Hanoi.

Some chancers end up being tricked into slave labor. Nam Thuy says it was a steamed bun laced with sedatives that did him in.

In May, facing an avalanche of medical bills, he decided on a last resort -- selling an organ. Thuy told Nikkei in Ho Chi Minh City that he jumped into a Hyundai vehicle with strangers thinking they'd broker the procedure. On the drive, the 30-year-old ate the bun, only to wake up hours later on the road to Cambodia, where he remained for months.

He and dozens of other Vietnamese were forced to adopt fake online identities to con people, he said. With a target of about \$4,000, he used chats to get people to invest in fraudulent get-rich-quick schemes.

"If you didn't meet the target, they shocked you, beat you or let you starve," he said, tugging away his medical mask to reveal missing teeth.

More people became vulnerable to exploitation during the pandemic and have been trafficked to a greater variety of places, but "the root cause is still poverty," said Nguyen Tra My, an anti-trafficking officer at Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, which rescues Vietnamese trapped in China. "The trafficking landscape changed," she said.



Trafficking victims receive art therapy in Vietnam. By one count, the country conducted 36,000 inspections yet reported no sex trafficking victims, the U.S. said. (Photo courtesy of Blue Dragon Children's Foundation)

Thai authorities and nonprofits say trafficking cannot be eradicated as long as economic opportunities at home are lacking. The promise of 30,000-baht monthly salaries is enough to persuade people to ignore red flags and take the risk of illegally crossing the border.

Ging, a 26-year-old single mother who was trafficked to Poipet, made only 9,000 baht per month at a local company in Saraburi Province. "It sounded like the recruiter really wanted to help me make money," she told Nikkei six days after her return from Cambodia.

"I was making money as they promised, but I just couldn't have my freedom," she said. To buy back her liberty, Ging had to raise three months' salary and borrow 30,000 baht from her hometown.

Namtip, the 15-year-old, thought she was signing up for a summer job between school terms to help her grandmother with expenses.

Sua, who was desperate for work after losing his job at a bank during the height of the pandemic, was trafficked to a casino in Sihanoukville. "The amount of money they were offering should have been a red flag," he said. "It was too much."

Sua now works with the Pavena Foundation for Children and Women, a nonprofit group for trafficked and abused women and children. Part of his work is encouraging victims to provide testimony to the police as most fear being charged for illegal acts committed forcibly, or for crossing borders illegally.

"If any country is weak on trafficking, we need to have some kind of sanction," said Pavena Hongsakul, a former Thai politician who runs her eponymous foundation.