

## Thailand

Thailand is a hub for many things – good and bad – in the greater Mekong sub-Region. This includes sadly being a hub for human trafficking. People from neighbouring countries are attracted for the sake of work and opportunity that they cannot find at home. What the most vulnerable migrants easily become in their new home is a source of cheap labour. Worse still, they may be tricked, lured or simply coerced into forced labour or outright slavery.

The “Trafficking in Persons from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to Thailand” Report was released in August 2017. It is the first joint report produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Thailand’s Institute of Justice (TIJ). It names that there are approximately four million migrants in Thailand, with over 90% coming from these three named neighbouring countries. Many are in an irregular situation in Thailand and work in low-skilled, labour intensive industries of agriculture, fishing, construction, manufacturing, domestic work, hospitality and the sex trade.

The report states:

“The irregular status of migrants from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar in Thailand, the migrants’ fear of deportation, the lack of knowledge of their rights and of the laws applicable to them, language barriers and limited access to authorities and to people outside their workplace make irregular migrants from these countries particularly vulnerable to deception, coercion, violence, exploitation and trafficking.” Reliable data on the actual level of trafficking is difficult to get but the estimate is that between 4 and 23 per cent of these irregular migrants could be classified as victims of human trafficking. This involves criminal networks that target the most vulnerable.

Despite the harsh realities they may face in Thailand, a huge number of people from these three neighbouring countries continue to come and stay. And why? Simply because what they face at home pushes them to look elsewhere for something better, and Thailand, a middle income country with a history of rapid development and a need for labour, is right next door.

So what do they flee from back home?

Poverty, lack of employment, internal state conflicts, persecution, harsh life realities, poor harvests.

The Thai Catholic Church, like Church anywhere, responds to such an injustice and evil as trafficking. Primary motivators over time have been both religious congregations and dioceses. Remember the Church is small in Thailand as it is a Buddhist nation, where only 320,000 are Catholic (or 0.05% of the population).

With the support of Talitha Kum Thailand, Caritas Thailand has been a central force, using its resources to bring together all players in the Church acting against human trafficking and for the good of its victims to establish an anti-trafficking network - CNATT (Catholic Network Against Trafficking in Thailand). This Catholic network has 25 members representing religious Sisters, Caritas Thailand and dioceses which are actively working against trafficking and have a commitment to ending it. Its activities feature

- networking in the community and with government;
- awareness raising;
- supporting survivors of trafficking and protection assistance;
- acting for prevention and in support of prosecution.

A simple but important tool has been the production of a CNATT handbook so that all may know who is involved and who is doing what. There are the ongoing activities of community trainings, the PR campaign through the media, the direct support for victims and survivors but there is more. CNATT acts to keep the bishops up to date on the situation and actively cooperates within the region on anti-trafficking efforts through Caritas Asia and its Caritas GMS (Greater Mekong sub-Region) anti-Trafficking Task Force.

The Church may be little in Thailand but it makes its contribution and is pro-active in its response to this wrong living at the heart of its nation.

