

DIPLOMAT
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Vietnam's Human Trafficking Problem Is Too Big to Ignore

The tragic deaths of 39 Vietnamese in the U.K. shine a harsh light on Vietnam's longstanding problem of human trafficking.

By Thoi Nguyen

Human trafficking is a big problem in Vietnam. Men, women, and children are trafficked for many reasons, including for sexual and labor exploitation, domestic slavery, and a range of other exploitative practices.

Anti-slavery groups have been warning for years of an increase in Vietnamese being smuggled into the United Kingdom, to no avail. But now the world has witnessed a devastating and heartbreaking tragedy shining a spotlight on Vietnamese human trafficking victims. When 39 people were found dead in the trailer of a lorry in England, it sparked the largest murder case in Essex Police history. Soon there was confirmation from the police that all 39 people found dead in the freezer container were Vietnamese were being smuggled into the country.

When Theresa May was home secretary, she passed the Modern Slavery Act, which came to effect in 2015. The new legislation was meant to combat slavery and increased the maximum custodial sentence for offenders from 14 years to life in prison. The U.K. Home Office estimated at the time that there were approximately between 10,000 and 13,000 people in the U.K. who were the victims of human trafficking.

There has been a significant rise in Vietnamese victims of human trafficking referrals in the U.K., from 135 in 2012 to 739 in 2018. Vietnam has been one of the top three countries in the world for trafficking into the U.K. for the past six years. Traffickers take children and adults for labor or sexual exploitation from Vietnam to countries such as Russia, Germany, or France before arriving in the U.K.

When writing expert reports for various clients, I had the opportunity to hear the story of a young Vietnamese boy, called Tu, who was trafficked to work in a cannabis factory in the U.K. at the age of 10. He was locked up, beaten, and forced to take drugs. He was forced to work in dreadful conditions, sometimes suffering physical or sexual abuse. And Tu is just one of thousands of children trafficked from Vietnam to the U.K.

Those children undertook a long, hard journey that included walking long distances or trying to get in the backs of lorries. It sometimes takes months and even years for young Vietnamese to arrive in the United Kingdom. These children are being abused and exploited in transit through at least eight countries in Europe, all the while being forced to work.

Criminal gangs also traffic Vietnamese women to Europe for prostitution and sexual exploitation, often hidden in massage parlors and beauty centers. Women are also trafficked into domestic work, where they must work for many years to repay their debts.

One Vietnamese woman, aged 29, was trafficked to China for sexual exploitation. She was forced to marry a disabled old man. She was detained in a small room and not allowed to

communicate with others outside because her husband feared she would escape. She finally did escape and returned to Vietnam, bringing with her trauma and tears. It has been eight years since the gang trafficked her to China, but the horrific scenes are indelibly seared into the victim's memory.

The victims of trafficking are normally from vulnerable groups in Vietnam. These people are poor, vulnerable, and come from a broken family. They lack education as well as awareness of trafficking, and are easily lured away with good job offers.

Traffickers increasingly use the internet, gaming sites, and particularly social media to lure potential victims into vulnerable situations. Men often entice young women and girls with online dating relationships and persuade them to move abroad, then subject them to forced labor or sex trafficking. Loan sharks are closely connected to trafficking victims and often act as migration brokers. Traffickers frequently take advantage of debt bondage to control their victims, as trafficked persons are lured with promises of economic opportunity. Traffickers also threaten families back home to ensure the victims continue to cooperate.

Despite significant gains in Vietnam's economy, the income gap between the rich and the poor has been growing steadily in Vietnam in recent years. Young workers and the middle class have suffered from a rising cost of living and millions of households are relatively poor. Young people are struggling to make ends meet and many have significant debts. In 2018 Vietnam's nominal GDP per capita was \$2,563 as of 2018 according to the World Bank. Poverty leaves young people with no choice but search for a better life abroad.

Once trafficked persons arrive, Vietnamese criminal gangs operating in the United Kingdom force the victims to work, often in cannabis production, brothels, and restaurants. Trafficking gangs demanded huge sums to smuggle them from Vietnam into the U.K. and then force them to work to repay their debts. It has been reported that traffickers charge around 25,000 pounds to smuggle people from Vietnam to the U.K.

Britain's Ambassador to Vietnam Gareth Ward warned potential victims that the dangers are clear: "Do not listen to those who tell you that can get you to the UK through the back door and help you to make money working illegally," he warned. "Be aware of the risks, don't be a victim."

Vietnam's response to human trafficking varies. The Vietnamese government is now cooperating with the Chinese authorities raise awareness of human trafficking victims. The Vietnamese authorities have also arrested some traffickers linked to the headline-grabbing deaths in the U.K.

Although Vietnam is making significant efforts to combat human trafficking, the Vietnamese government did not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking according to the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report 2019. The report found that "Complicit Vietnamese officials, primarily at commune and village levels, facilitate trafficking or exploit victims by accepting bribes from traffickers, overlooking trafficking indicators, and extorting money in exchange for reuniting victims with their families." There is evidence to suggest that the police in Vietnam are also corrupt and collude with organized criminals, including traffickers.

A recent survey by Transparency International found that nearly one-third of people had paid bribes to public servants in Vietnam. According to the same survey, the police in Vietnam are the most corrupt of 12 institutions in the country. Corruption continues to be pervasive in Vietnam, complicating efforts to wipe out human trafficking.

The vast majority of former trafficking victims are reluctant to report traffickers to the local authorities. They worry about reprisal from organized criminal gangs and also fear traffickers will accuse them of being complicit in crimes.

Meanwhile, even after returning home former victims of trafficking find it difficult to rebuild their lives and integrate back into the community in Vietnam. Former trafficking victims, who all too often have suffered physical and sexual abuse, face big social stigmas in Vietnamese society. Negative attitudes from neighbors can also dissuade them from cooperating with the local authorities or giving information about their traffickers. Hence, as part of overall efforts the Vietnamese authorities need to provide more support to human trafficking victims through funding for shelters, re-integration services, therapeutic support, legal and financial assistance, and education.

The department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs in Hanoi has admitted the current problems, including a lack of resources to support victims. The administration also admits to not helping victims who do not possess the necessary identity documents on return to Vietnam.

In my view, the Vietnamese authorities need to spend more money to tackle the ongoing human trafficking problem. Right now, the government has limited protections available to former victims of trafficking. The Vietnamese authorities also need to rehabilitate all victims of human trafficking throughout Vietnam effectively, both in the rural and urban areas, using longer-term reintegration programs. NGOs can play a vital role to raise community awareness and join hands in supporting the victims.

These are the real solutions for the Vietnamese government to combat its human trafficking problem. Otherwise, the tragic deaths of 39 Vietnamese will have been in vain.

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