

HUMAN TRAFFICKING SNAPSHOT

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

September, 2018

This *Human Trafficking Snapshot* was developed to provide background for practitioners who want to conduct counter trafficking activities in Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter Lao PDR).

In addition, the *Human Trafficking Snapshot* serves the following purposes, to:

- 1 Identifies the key Trafficking in Persons (TIP) trends, including priority target audiences: by geography, age, gender, ethnicity and so forth;
- 2 Provides media consumption data;
- 3 Provides an information resource for the counter-trafficking sector and local IOM partners to ensure consistency of messaging across all related activities.



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WHAT IS IOM X?

IOM X is the International Organization of Migration's (IOM) innovative campaign to encourage safe migration and public action to stop exploitation and human trafficking. The campaign leverages the power and popularity of media and technology to inspire young people and their communities to act against human trafficking – the buying and selling of people for the purpose of exploitation – which is happening in every country in the world today. The campaign is produced in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and works closely with celebrities, private sector partners, government agencies, NGOs and youth groups across Asia Pacific.

HOW IS THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING SNAPSHOT USED?

The *Human Trafficking Snapshot* is a strategic document used by IOM X to guide the development of key messages and calls-to-action for the prevention of specific country-related TIP themes/issues and related at-risk target audience of IOM X video programmes and activities.

IOM X's process of creating video programmes and activities involves the use of the Human Trafficking Snapshot and in-country consultations with partners and IOM staff to identify the priority TIP theme/issue in the country. The identified issue and media consumption information is then further analyzed through the application of the Communication for Development (C4D) strategic planning tool. The key output of this process is a briefing document, which outlines key messages and specific calls-to-action to be shared both internally and with relevant partners (production houses, co-implementing organizations).

Not all information presented in this snapshot is IOM data. To compile this snapshot, IOM X conducted a desk review by consulting an array of sources, including information from governments, international organizations, (I)NGOs and local and international media sources. The snapshot uses the most up-to-date information available.

INTRODUCTION

Lao PDR is a landlocked country bordered by Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam, China and Myanmar. It is an ethnically diverse country, comprised of 49 different ethnic groups and was colonized by France in the early 1900s, but became a sovereign state in 1954. With the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon to communist forces in 1975 after the second Indochina War, the Lao government gave way to the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic leading to 10 per cent of the population fleeing the country.¹

INTRODUCTION

Regional integration is a key issue for Lao PDR, as it moves towards closer economic relations with its neighbouring states, particularly with the advent of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Integration in 2015.

With the increasing economic integration, large transportation infrastructure projects have emerged, facilitating the movement of people.

In recent times, the country has witnessed an increase in job opportunities in urban areas to the point where there is now a labour shortage. Many Lao migrants, however, particularly from the rural areas where jobs are scarce and low-paid, continue to cross into Thailand for work. A lack of public awareness of laws and legislation relating to working in Thailand makes potential migrants vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking.

In the US State Department Trafficking in Persons report, Lao PDR has been on Tier 2 watch list since 2014 as it does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. However, Lao PDR has avoided being placed on Tier 3 as it obtained a waiver due to efforts to create a solid anti-trafficking plan.²

Lao PDR is also an active member of ASEAN and the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT).

LAO PDR DEMOGRAPHICS

Population	6,758,353 (2016)
Urban vs. Rural	Urban: 32.9% Rural: 67.1%
Demographic Trends	About 32% of the population is under 14 years old (2015 est.)
Poverty	23.2% live below the poverty line (2015 est.)
Unemployment	1.5% (2016 est.)
Youth Unemployment (ages 15-24)	Total: 5.1% - Male: 4.3% Female: 5.9% (2015 est.)
Religions	Buddhist 64.7%, Christian 1.7%, other 33.6% (2015 est.)
Ethnic Groups	Lao 53.2%, Khmou 11%, Hmong 9.2%, Phouthay 3.4%, Tai 3.1%, Makong 2.5%, Katang 2.2%, Lue 2.0%, Akha 1.8%, others 11.6% (2015 est.)
Languages	Lao (official), English, French, various ethnic languages
Literacy	Total population: 84.7% Male: 90% Female: 79.4% (2015 est.)

Sources: Lao Statistics Bureau, World Bank Lao PDR, Asian Development Bank, Trading Economics

MIGRATION INFORMATION

There are currently about 1.2 million Lao migrants abroad, including refugees resettled as permanent residents, as well as workers.³ The majority of Lao migrant workers are in Thailand (49%), the United States (33%) and France (8%).⁴

Lao migrants are drawn to migrate to Thailand by higher wages. Additionally, integration is relatively easy as the two countries share a similar language and cultural traditions. The system of border passes, which allows simple entry into Thailand for short periods, and porous borders where people are able to cross irregularly back and forth with no records of their border, means that a sizable number of Lao migrant workers enter and work in Thailand without proper official permits.⁵



Another important reason for the majority of Lao migrant workers to have chosen the unofficial channels for migrating to Thailand (and other neighbouring countries) is the cost difference between official and unofficial channels: the cost with unofficial channels ranges between 14% and 40% of the official channel.⁶

Young people from rural areas are the most vulnerable category of migrants. Their motivations for migrating include a complex mix of aspirations for modernity; obligation to remit money to parents (which weighs particularly upon young women); under-employment; lack of useful vocational education; uncertainty of income; and poverty in their home communities. Rural to urban migration within Lao PDR is driven by similar motives and is creating increasing numbers of urban poor, who are also at risk of trafficking.⁷

The minimum wage in Thailand is USD 260 for a 26 workday month⁸, whereas in Lao PDR it is only USD 110 for 26 workdays a month.⁹ This makes migration attractive to unskilled workers.

While there is considerable emigration to the neighbouring countries, increasing numbers of migrant workers are also entering Lao PDR from Viet Nam, China, Thailand and Myanmar. There are an estimated 200,000 migrant workers officially in the country, mostly in the construction sector, where Chinese and Vietnamese contractors and investors prefer to employ their compatriots because of their experience, ease of communication (speak the same language) and willingness to work for lower wages.¹⁰

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN LAO PDR

OVERVIEW

United States Trafficking in Persons Report Tier Ranking	Tier 3 – Government does not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so. The standards used to measure efforts are aligned on the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which is based on implementing policies concerning the 3Ps (Prosecution, Protection and Prevention).
Global Slavery Index	22 of 167 – This index ranks 167 countries based on the proportion of population that is estimated to be in modern slavery. Low ranks indicate a higher prevalence and risk of modern slavery in the country.
Source	Lao PDR nationals are known to be subjected to forced labour, trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced marriage in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Viet Nam, China and South Korea.
Transit	Lao PDR is a transit country for victims from China and Viet Nam passing through Lao PDR on their route to Thailand.
Destination	Lao PDR is a destination country for victims from Viet Nam and Myanmar
Routes	Vientiane (Lao PDR) – Udon Thani – Sadao Checkpoint (Songkhla) Vientiane (Lao PDR) – Nong Khai – Sadao Checkpoint (Songkhla) ¹¹ Phongsaly – Northern border provinces (Lao PDR) - China Golden Triangle – Yunnan/Myanmar Vientiane/Savanakhet/Pakxe/southern border provinces (Lao PDR) – Thailand Viet Nam – Savanakhet (Lao PDR) – Thailand
Hubs	Vientiane
Internal	Victims of internal trafficking are mainly women and children, often from ethnic minorities from the northern provinces, being exploited in factories or for sex work in Vientiane and in border areas and special economic zones (SEZ), casinos and urban areas.
Industries involving trafficking	Commercial fishing, construction, manufacturing, agricultural industries, domestic work, sex work and sex tourism, and forced marriage.

¹ Despite being placed on Tier 2 Watch List for the third consecutive year, Lao PDR avoided an automatic downgrade to Tier 3 in 2017 as it received a special waiver due to the government devoting sufficient resources to create a robust anti-trafficking plan.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN LAO PDR

OVERVIEW

Industries involving trafficking	Commercial fishing, construction, manufacturing, agricultural industries, domestic work, sex work and sex tourism, and forced marriage.
Victims	Trafficked persons experience various difficulties ranging from physical and mental health issues, to economic difficulties, and social reintegration issues. Girls and women may face more problems with the authorities upon their return, due to the suspicion of having been engaged in sex work in Thailand.
Traffickers	Traffickers are increasingly using local Lao middlemen for the recruitment of victims. Furthermore, transport providers at the Thai borders pick up economic migrants and bring them into exploitative work settings. Local and Lao PDR border officials are taking bribes and facilitate transport or immigration of girls over the border to Thailand.

Sources: *US TIP Report (2018; 2016;), Global Slavery Index (2018; 2016), UN-ACT Lao PDR, World Vision Lao PDR, SIREN Human Trafficking Datasheet 2008, IOM*

HUMAN TRAFFICKING TRENDS

TREND #1: CROSS-BORDER TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

WHAT?

It is believed that the majority of trafficking from Lao PDR occurs to Thailand where the majority of victims are girls under the age of 18.¹² Of those people trafficked to Thailand, it has been estimated that about 35% end up being trafficked for sexual exploitation.¹³

Traffickers use “travel expenses” and other recruitment fees demanded to hold victims in debt bondage.¹⁴

A number of women are sold as brides in China and South Korea and subsequently trafficked for sexual exploitation.¹⁵

WHERE?

Victims are trafficked from rural areas in the northern regions to China for fake marriages, and from the rural southern regions to Thailand for sexual exploitation.

HOW ARE VICTIMS RECRUITED?

Most migration to Thailand is voluntary in search for better economic opportunities. Girls planning or expecting to end up in commercial entertainment (sex work) might want to leave secretly to minimize stigma and thus are more vulnerable to choose informal unsafe ways of migration. Sex work is stigmatized, however it represents the best economic opportunity for many.¹⁷

Traffickers are mostly persons known to the victims, either residents of their villages or having some other connection to the community, sometimes officials. Victims are often passed between several traffickers.¹⁸

Some victims are secondary victims that have been trafficked/exploited internally in urban areas and are then further trafficked into Thailand.¹⁹

WHO IS AT RISK?

Most at risk are those in vulnerable social positions, particularly young women facing problems at home and/or those without well-established cross-border networks made up of family and friends. Many victims are from the Lao-Tai ethnic group.²⁰

HUMAN TRAFFICKING TRENDS

TREND #2: INTERNAL TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

WHAT?

Women and girls are being exploited inside the country to meet the demand of tourists and migrant workers. There have also been reports of tourists from the UK, USA and Australia traveling to Lao PDR to exploit children sex tourism.²²

Establishments offering sex services include different types of entertainment industries like cafes, hotels, bars, restaurants and others.²³

The children's work has been described to include providing beer, getting the men drunk, and then offering sexual services.²⁴

In some places victims receive no salary, income comes only from tips of customers, a percentage from drinks sold to customers and sexual services outside the establishment.

Many parents rely on the remittances that their children, especially daughters, send home, even though not all parents know where their children are or in what type of work they are engaged.²⁵

As a consequence of police crackdowns on under-aged girls and migrants in Mukdahan (Thailand) on the border to Lao PDR, the “entertainment scene” including sex services in Savannakhet at the Lao side of the border has expanded. This exemplifies a shift from external to internal trafficking.²⁶

WHERE?

Victims are trafficked from Luang Prabang, Luang Namtha and other northern provinces, Sayabouri, Khammuane and semi-rural or semi-urban areas to Savannakhet, Vientiane and other urban areas, and to special economic zones, large development project construction sites like the Nam Theu hydro electric dam²⁷, along transit routes and truck stops, borders, near the golden triangle and at casinos.

HOW ARE VICTIMS RECRUITED?

Relatives, friends and other community members often recruit girls; many are tricked by false job offers, as victims often face social and economic pressures.

Lately there has been an increase in young women from college being recruited into the sex industry, some of which become victims of trafficking.²⁸

WHO IS AT RISK?

Women and children from Northern provinces, particularly ethnic minorities and children with family problems, and increasingly women of Vietnamese ethnicity.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING TRENDS

TREND #3: CROSS-BORDER TRAFICKING WOMEN AND CHILDREN FOR FORCED DOMESTIC WORK

WHAT?

In the confines of other people's homes, victims are isolated. Many lack written contracts, have their documents confiscated by their employers and are either underpaid or not paid at all. Some end up in situations of debt bondage.²⁹

A study showed that often, Lao domestic workers work more than 12 hours a day in Thailand.³⁰

WHERE?

Victims are trafficked from semi-rural areas of the lowland regions of Lao PDR and southern provinces to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

HOW ARE VICTIMS RECRUITED?

Most migrate voluntarily in search of better economic opportunities.³¹

Especially children under the age of 18 are at risk of being trafficked as their underage status often leads them to unlicensed brokers or recruitment agencies.³²

WHO IS AT RISK?

Those most at risk are primarily women and girls from poor backgrounds, who have few economic prospects in Lao PDR.³³

HUMAN TRAFFICKING TRENDS

TREND #3: FORCED LABOUR OR EXPLOITATION IN THE AGRICULTURE, FISHING AND CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

WHAT?

Recently a number of Lao nationals working on Thai fishing boats have been identified in Indonesian waters.³⁴

Fishermen often don't have a signed labour agreement with employers, face extremely long working hours of 17-24 hours, below minimum wage, deductions from employers for living provisions, a hazardous working environment, inadequate food and drinking water, threat, physical abuse and forced transfers to other boats.³⁵

A study showed that a high percentage of Lao migrants working in agriculture in Thailand worked more than 12 hours a day and felt that these hours were inappropriate. They rated their bosses and working conditions as unfair, stated high levels of violence and reported restricted freedom of movement. A high number was potentially trafficked. Many of them used brokers and the sector bore the highest costs for reaching the destination.³⁶

The study also showed that a high number of workers in agriculture and construction work 7 days per week.³⁷

WHERE?

Victims are trafficked from semi-rural areas of the lowland regions of Lao PDR and southern provinces to Bangkok and Thailand's border provinces for forced labour in the construction industry. Forced labour victims in the fishing industry are trafficked to Ranong, Rayong, Sonkhla, Samut Sakhon, Mahachai³⁸ and Indonesia.

HOW ARE VICTIMS RECRUITED?

Many Lao people migrate voluntarily for better economic opportunities and face exploitation in the work setting. Some are tricked into those working conditions following fake promises. Furthermore, transport providers at the Thai border pick up migrants and send them to exploitative employers.³⁹ Foreign traffickers are increasingly using local Lao middlemen for recruitment. Vehicle drivers intercept migrants pushed back from Thailand and re-traffic them.⁴⁰

WHO IS AT RISK?

Economic migrants with no determined destination of migration.⁴¹

COUNTER-TRAFFICKING ACTIONS

The Government of Lao PDR has taken steps over the last decade to address the issue of human trafficking from a prevention, protection, prosecution and policy perspective. Some of the important steps include the following:

National and local actions

- ◆ Article 89 of Lao national law prohibits all forms of human trafficking. If found guilty, penalties include imprisonment (from five years to life), fines between USD 1,230-120,300, the confiscation of assets or shall be the subject to capital punishment.⁴²
- ◆ In 2014, on International Human Trafficking Day (December 12), the Prime Minister gave a speech to raise awareness of trafficking that reached more than 1,000 individuals.
- ◆ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to distribute materials about safe migration and the risks of human trafficking to Lao citizens applying for passports.
- ◆ The government added anti-trafficking provisions into basic training courses for police, and led donor-funded trainings that reached more than 300 officials. In 2015, foreign donor trainings continued for immigration, police and justice officials.
- ◆ Lao PDR has created The National Steering Committee on Human Trafficking (NSC), which is an inter-agency body headed by the Minister of Public Security (MPS), bringing together all relevant governmental anti-trafficking stakeholders.⁴³
- ◆ New legislation, the Law on Anti-Trafficking in Persons was finalised in December 2015 and put in effect in February 2016.⁴⁴
- ◆ In 2015, authorities reported investigating 41 individuals for suspected trafficking offenses, prosecuting nine, and convicting 13 trafficking offenders.
- ◆ Government-controlled print, television and radio media continued to carry a variety of pieces to promote anti-trafficking awareness throughout 2016. Additionally, government officials distributed materials to provincial and community leaders and members to raise awareness.
- ◆ In 2016, training sessions that aimed to raise awareness on human trafficking also took place for those involved in the tourism sector.⁴⁵ A new national action plan for 2016-2020 was completed and resources were designated to carry this plan out. The government has also reported to increase funding for anti-trafficking activities.⁴⁶

COUNTER-TRAFFICKING ACTIONS

Regional and global actions

- ◆ Adopted the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking in 2016 and produced a victims identification manual for the country's Anti-Trafficking Department.
- ◆ In April 2017, formally approved the ASEAN Convention on Trafficking in Persons.
- ◆ In September 2014, the Lao Government signed an agreement with the Government of China to cooperate on protecting and repatriating victims of trafficking.
- ◆ In early 2015, following several human trafficking cases, Thai immigration officials began increasing their scrutiny at the border checkpoint, and have introduced a ban on entry of unaccompanied under-aged Lao girls into Thailand.⁴⁷

REPORTED CHALLENGES IN COMBATTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Despite the action being taken by the Lao PDR Government to tackle internal and cross-border human trafficking, several challenges remain. These include the following:

- ◆ **Porous borders and human connectivity across borders:** Trafficking victims and migrants exploited in Thailand are often from Lao ethnic minority groups. As Laotians share a similar language and culture to Thais, adaptation is not that difficult. There are well-established connections and networks across the borders and border officials have been complicit and taking bribes to facilitate transportation of Lao nationals across the border. Lately however, border officials have started to limit border crossing of under-aged girls making a vulnerable appearance.
- ◆ **Facilitation of trafficking via family and community members:** Within the country and abroad, many victims of trafficking get lured into an exploitative condition via friends or family members who are already working in the sector.⁴⁸

REPORTED CHALLENGES IN COMBATting HUMAN TRAFFICKING

- ◆ **Fear and lack of trust:** Escaped victims are often too scared to approach the police in destination countries, as they are aware that law enforcement employees are sometimes involved in trafficking networks and/or are likely to deport them or place them in shelters where they have no opportunities to make money. The lack of trust in the assistance offered can be borne out of past trafficking-related experiences and the fear of being cheated again.⁴⁹ Moreover, Lao officials have been complicit in facilitating the transport of girls over the border.⁵⁰
- ◆ **Stigma:** Victims trafficked for sexual exploitation are reluctant to report their cases, due to feelings or fear of embarrassment, stigmatization or degradation. This obscures data on employment of migrants, which heavily relies on registered migrants, excluding those informally employed in sex work. Furthermore girls planning or expecting to end up in sex work might want to leave secretly to minimize stigma and thus are more vulnerable to choose informal and unsafe ways of migration.⁵¹
- ◆ **Insufficient victim protection and reintegration:** Victims of trafficking might receive some assistance but not the full package they require to move on from their trafficking experience and reintegrate into society.⁵² As a result, there is a high likelihood of the victims returning to the same (or similar) situation that made them vulnerable to trafficking in the first place. Victim services are mainly provided by NGOs and international organizations⁵³ and unfortunately few services are offered for male victims.⁵⁴
- ◆ **Victim identification mechanism and risk of re-trafficking:** Each year more than 10,000 Laotian migrants are deported or 'pushed back' into Lao PDR without official notice. Once sent back across the Mekong, there are few screening mechanisms to identify victims of human trafficking. There are reports of traffickers preying on these deported migrants, waiting to intercept and (re-) traffic migrants.⁵⁵

MEDIA CONTEXT

The media context in Lao PDR is less developed than in neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia but on a rapid rise since 2000, due to the availability of new technologies and economic development. Although the Lao PDR Government granted the right for private sector organizations to run television, radio stations and print media and buy airtime on government TV and radio channels in 2008, press freedom is highly restrictive. Yet media is growing; there are now 32 TV stations, mobile penetration has risen remarkably and Internet penetration is increasing rapidly. Urban youth use Facebook and blogs to share information and discuss issues. This increase in media use can potentially provide extensive opportunities to utilize media platforms to engage a multitude of audiences on the issue of human trafficking.⁵⁶ However, in late 2014 the government imposed a highly prohibitive new cybercrime law that outlaws any online criticism of the government. Social media users must also use their full names when registering accounts.⁵⁷

Media	Penetration Rate	Relevant Information
Television	58% (2018 est.) ⁵⁸	Top broadcasters: TV1, TV3, TV5, LNTV, Lao Star; along border regions Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese channels are accessible. ⁵⁹ Genres: News, quiz shows, soap operas, films
Internet	20% ⁶⁰	Demographics: 56% of Facebook users in Lao PDR are under the age of 25 Social Media: 19% of the population are active social media users ⁶¹
Radio	90% ⁶²	There are around 35 stations, all of which are government controlled. ⁶³
Mobile phones	85% ⁶⁴	Usage: 21% of the population uses social media on mobile phones (2017 est.) ⁶⁵
Print	23% ⁶⁶	There are seven daily newspapers, the biggest of which reaches between 6,000-10,000 people a day. ⁶⁷

KEY RESOURCES

IOM Lao PDR: Established in 1951, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the leading inter-governmental organization in the field of migration and works closely with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners. In the Lao PDR, IOM is active in a number of different areas including Migration Management and Disaster Response Management. Website: <https://www.iom.int/countries/lao-peoples-democratic-republic>

United Nations Action for Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT): It was established in 2014 to ensure a coordinated approach to more strategically and effectively combat trafficking in persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and beyond. The project builds upon the work previously undertaken by the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP). Website: <http://un-act.org/>

ILO TRIANGLE II Project: UN project in Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Myanmar and Malaysia focused on promoting fair migration and improving governance and rights of migrant workers. Website: <http://www.ilo.org>. Telephone: +662 288 2245

1300 Helpline: Toll-free Thai and English language TIP hotline operated by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to receive complaints and information about trafficking in persons.

Anti Slavery International – Project Issara: 24-hour nationwide multilingual migrant worker hotline in Thailand. Provide information for migrant workers on labour rights, government registration, processes, or can be called to report cases or request assistance. Website: <http://www.projectissara.org/> Telephone: +66 80 456 5560 (Myanmar language), +66 86 967 2891 (Lao and Thai language), +66 86 968 6085 (Khmer language)

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