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SPECIAL REPORT

# Easy prey

From slave labour to abused maids and unwilling brides,  
human trafficking thriving in ASEAN because of  
corrupt officials, apathy and a lack of political will

# PRINCE Uncharming

Chinese demand fuels  
trafficking in  
unwilling brides



A bride watches guests from the sidelines of her wedding reception near Udong, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. -Reuters

By DENISE HRUBY / Phnom Penh

**K**ai Sochoeun had a clear picture of China. She imagined green, rolling hills stretching between large and crystal-clear rivers in the countryside, and in the vibrant cities, skyscrapers alighting the nights.

It was an image of a better life than tending a handful of chickens and a small plot of land where the 29-year-old's family grew vegetables in Cambodia. In China, the men are rich, sophisticated, loving family fathers – the opposite of the poor and often drunk farmers in Sochoeun's village.

But the land of Cockaigne was something she only experienced in the romantic Chinese dramas she watched on TV at her countryside home.

Her life would always be the same, Sochoeun thought, until a woman from a neighbouring village offered her a way out. The woman told her she would help take her to China, where she could marry one of the rich, handsome men Sochoeun had seen on TV, and on top of that, she could get a job where she would make around US\$500 a month.

In hindsight, Sochoeun knew that it was too good to be true.

“I heard of such stories, where women were trafficked, where they were tricked and then sold. But I thought it wouldn't happen to me,” she said.

Worldwide, up to 60 million people are trafficked as modern-day slaves, according to estimates by the United



Cambodian Kai Sochoeun, who was trafficked to China, at her family's home in Kandal province.



The site of a suspected human trafficking camp near Baan Klong Tor in southern Thailand. – Reuters

Nation's Inter Agency Programme on Human Trafficking (UNIAP), presented at a conference in Phnom Penh last month.

“Asia, and in particular Southeast Asia, remains one of the key areas of origin and destination of trafficking in persons,” said Annette Lyth, regional programme coordinator for UNIAP.

Although most cases are never reported, the trade in human beings is estimated to be worth billions of dollars each year.

According to the UN's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 18 per cent of victims are trafficked into forced labour. In Asia, most of those people work in the agriculture or fisheries sectors, but also in garment factories. Sexual exploitation accounts for 79 per cent of all victims, making it by far the most common form of human

trafficking.

The medieval picture of slaves being shackled and dragged behind a horse has been replaced by much more subtle forms of modern slavery. Most of the time, said Sebastian Boll, regional researcher for UNIAP, victims agree to travel abroad, but end up in abusive circumstances with no way out.

“[If] a woman is brought to China on the basis of a promised job and a rich husband, when the actual end situation is very different, and their passports are withdrawn making it difficult to escape, etc., if there is clear exploitation, then this may very well be a case of human trafficking,” he said.

It took less than a week to get a passport for Sochoeun. Shortly after that, she was taken to Phnom Penh International Airport, where she boarded a flight to

Guangzhou along with two other Cambodian women.

The Cambodian flag they waved upon their arrival was a sign for a Cambodian-Chinese woman and four Chinese men with her that Sochoeun and the two younger women were the new arrivals.

Their passports were taken away, and they were taken to a house several hours from Guangzhou, Sochoeun said.

“They told me the city was called Fuja – F – U – J – A, but I don't know where it was, and everything was in Chinese,” she said.

At the house, the Chinese-Cambodian woman told them to dress up and put on some make up.

Chinese men were to inspect the new arrivals and pick them as wives.

Sit on the couch, smile and behave, they were told.

“When I was sitting there so the Chinese men could look at me, I knew that I was trafficked. They chose us, and I felt like a prostitute, because I was told to dress up and do my make-up to make them attracted to me,” Sochoeun said.

As the oldest in the group, she was the last to be chosen.

Her Chinese Prince Charming turned out to be a poor, occasional construction worker who lived with his family.

On average, she was sexually abused four times a day, and beaten when she refused herself, she said. She was also locked in a room, and only let out to eat.

She begged to return to Cambodia, but was told that her husband had paid US\$15,000 for her, about half of the dowry for an uneducated Chinese woman.

Besides unaffordable dowries, China's One Child Policy has left millions of young men desperate for brides – and heirs.

In 2005, the British Medical Journal estimated that China had produced a surplus of 32 million young men – larger than the population of Malaysia.

“Trafficking cases for forced marriage [from] Southeast Asia [to China] are regularly reported in Myanmar and Vietnam, and to a lesser degree too in Laos,” the UNIAP's Boll said.

But the UN, anti-human trafficking organisations and the Cambodian government all said that they did not know why Cambodia only first saw trafficking of brides to China two years ago.

Now, every month the police arrest traffickers as they are about to send off Cambodian women at the airport.

“We don't know why this has risen so much, but we take it seriously,” Choun Bun Eng, chairwoman of the government's committee to fight human trafficking, said.

After more than a month of rape and confinement, Sochoeun managed to get hold of a phone and contacted a human rights radio station in Phnom Penh. With the help of the Cambodian Embassy, they set her repatriation in motion. One of the women who had boarded the flight with her was also repatriated, but neither of them knew

what had become of the third.

At her wooden stilt home in Kandal province, Sochoeun said she hopes that her story is widely shared, so that other women will not fall for the same false promises.

She said she is now pleased to be tilling her small plot of land and tending after her chickens. She said she knew that she was lucky to have escaped.

“It felt like I was given a second chance... like I was reborn,” she said.



Unemployed women wait for information about possible jobs as garment workers outside an industrial zone where factories are based in a suburb of Phnom Penh. – Reuters

# Acting together

ASEAN convention on human trafficking  
aims to regionalise the issue

By DENISE HRUBY / Phnom Penh

Out of every 100 victims of human trafficking, only one is rescued. This shocking figure, the United Nations has said, is likely to rise because human trafficking is a fast-growing business. After the illicit trade in drug and arms, modern day slavery is the most lucrative form of illegal trafficking. UN estimates put annual profits at US\$3.2 billion.

This year, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plans to finish a draft of the Convention on Trafficking in Persons, aimed at reversing, or at least combating, the trend. ASEAN is scheduled to adopt the

Convention at next year's summit in Malaysia.

So far, all ASEAN members except Singapore have specific domestic laws on human trafficking. But human trafficking needs to be dealt with as a regional issue that spans borders, said Khine Myat Chit, senior officer in the Security Cooperation Division of the ASEAN Secretariat.

"The most important thing will be the protection of the rights of the victims and to give national guidelines and regional guidelines in protecting the rights of vulnerable people, not just women and children, but also men. And that we don't differentiate by gender," she said.

Especially when victims of human trafficking are



Akram, an 18-year-old Rohingya, who cannot walk and whose body is pocked with fly-blown sores from months of immobility, is seen resting on a makeshift bed at a mosque near Songkhla, close to Thailand's border with Malaysia in this February 12 picture. He had escaped from a Thai trafficking camp less than three weeks before with a horror story that underscores the human toll of Thailand's deportation policy. The Rohingya were forced to squat during the day and sleep in a foetal position at night, and beaten by camp guards if they stood or even stretched, said Akram. Fed rice gruel twice a day and weakened by chronic diarrhoea, Akram soon discovered that he was paralysed. – Reuters

forced to engage in illegal activities, such as selling drugs or prostitution, domestic laws often end up targeting them as perpetrators.

A quick repatriation of victims is also vital for their mental recovery.

“[Once] a victim is rescued and identified... after giving their statements [to authorities], they can go back from shelters to their homes... so they don't feel confined to centres,” she said.

Once the Convention is adopted, Chit said, several countries will have to amend national laws and enact new ones.

“This will be legally binding for all members, so everybody will be bound to protect people from trafficking,” she said.

According to figures for 2012 compiled by the UN's Campaign to Combat Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion, Laos reported 193 cases of trafficking, Myanmar 364, Thailand 594, Vietnam 883 and Cambodia 959.

But those, said Annette Lyth, regional project manager for the UN's Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, were only reported figures, and do not fully represent how many people were subject to human trafficking.

“[Most] cases are not reported and there are no reliable estimates,” she said, although tens of thousands of victims were likely forced to live and work under unbearable circumstances in the region.

At a UN General Assembly session in 2012, Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, emeritus professor at Chicago's DePaul University and an expert on international human rights laws, spoke about the need to have more than just laws in place to combat human trafficking.

“There is no human rights subject on which governments have said so much but done so little,” he said.

It is unlikely whether the ASEAN Convention will bring about more arrests of traffickers – and fewer victims among those trafficked. But committing to a regional Convention, Chit said, had to be the first step.

“We need a joint response, and for that, we need a regional Convention first,” Chit said.



Children of suspected Uighurs from China's troubled far-western region of Xinjiang, rest on a ground inside a temporary shelter after they were detained at the immigration regional headquarters near the Thailand-Malaysia border in Hat Yai, Songkla on March 14. About 200 people were rescued by police from a human smuggling camp. – Reuters



# Abused domestics

Plight of Cambodian maids in Malaysia  
a sticking point in bilateral ties

By DENISE HRUBY / Phnom Penh

**I**n October 2011, dozens of young Cambodian women boarded a flight from Phnom Penh for Kuala Lumpur. In tears, they bade their families farewell before they took off into an uncertain future. They were the last batch that would officially leave Cambodia to work as maids in Malaysia.

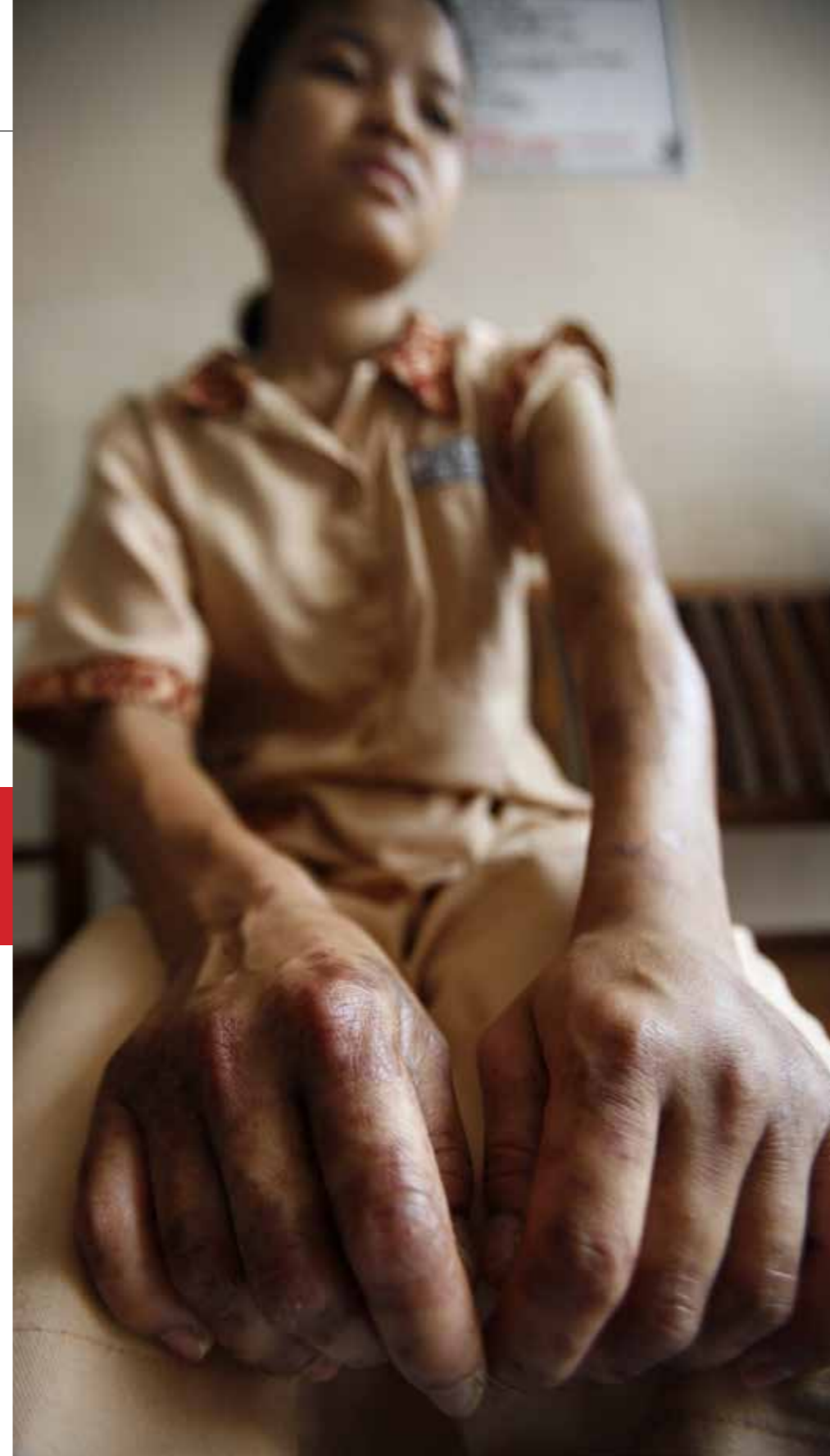
That same day, Prime Minister Hun Sen imposed a moratorium on sending Cambodian women to work as maids in Malaysia.

The measure was in response to reports of abuse by Malaysian employers. An 18-year-old girl had sought refuge at the Cambodian Embassy after her employer had raped her.

A 23-year-old woman reported torture and frequent beatings. At least three women, whose families said they were healthy and mentally stable when they left Cambodia, committed suicide during their stay there. One woman was starved to death by her employers in Penang.

Similar, horrific stories of abuse, torture and suicide had led national headlines for months.

But under the right circumstances, working as a maid abroad offers a way out of poverty for the mostly rural young women and their families, whose only alternative is working in one of Cambodia's garment factories, where they are able to save only a handful of dollars each month.



Indonesian maid Sri Lestari Wagiyo, 19, of East Java, shows the injuries she suffered at the hands of her Malaysian employer in this November 5, 2009, picture. – Reuters

The money that maids, as well as other migrant workers, send back to their families is a significant contribution to Cambodia's economy – one that the government cannot easily forego. Aceda Bank, by far the largest bank with the most branches in rural areas, estimate US\$81 million in remittances every month.

The Ministry of Labour has said that it hopes to send a total of 300,000 women to Malaysia. The remittances would amount to US\$1.5 billion, almost half of the Kingdom's annual budget.

Since both sides stand to profit, Cambodia and Malaysia quickly began drafting a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that would resume the flow of maids while guaranteeing their safety.

What was meant to take only a few months, however, has proven to be an arduous task.

The MoU has been sent back and forth between Phnom Penh and Kuala Lumpur several times, with each side making amendments to their advantage.

Early last November, the Cambodian Ministry of Labour announced that the MoU would be signed by January, and that about 1,000 Cambodian women would leave to work in Malaysia every month.

But the MoU still hasn't been signed. "There is no problem. Two years

ago, the Cambodians initiated the memorandum, and it's taking a longer time because both sides are being very careful," Raja Saifful Ridzuwan, the Malaysian Embassy's spokesperson, said.

"Whatever it is, we take Cambodia's concerns into account," he added.

Cambodian officials took the latest version sent by Malaysia, however, as an affront.

Jenna Holiday, a consultant for UN Women who has helped in the drafting process, said Malaysia had rejected about 90 per cent of stipulations aimed at guaranteeing workers' rights, from keeping their own passport, having a safe and private room, to three meals a day as well as annual leave and maximum overtime.

A line in the MoU that said that employers had to "respect the basic human rights" of maids was also crossed out.

Asked about these specific amendments, Ridzuwan said they were not true.

"I don't think so. How do you know this? This is confidential.... I will have to raise this with the Cambodians," he said, adding that draft documents should not be leaked, before declining to comment further.

The MoU was the centre of discussion at a quarterly, internal meeting between Cambodian government representatives and non-governmental organisations on human trafficking last month.

All parties were frustrated at the slow progress, and the many provisions that were rejected by the Malaysian side.

Holiday said that despite the frustration, it was important that the MoU guarantee workers' safety.

"We can't rush this," she cautioned. Although Cambodia wants to send maids to Malaysia, Holiday said that Malaysia was also in dire need of domestic workers.

Foreigners make up 21 per cent of Malaysia's workforce, and, at the time of the moratorium, an estimated 50,000 Cambodians were employed as maids for Malaysian families. Even for middle-class families, it's not uncommon to keep a domestic worker.



A Rohingya woman cooks in the kitchen at her family's rented house in Cheras Baru, Kuala Lumpur. – Reuters

The number of countries willing to send maids to Malaysia is also dwindling, Holiday said.

"The MoU with Indonesia is a bad example, it was a failure. And the Indonesians are not sending enough maids anymore.... Cambodia has more leverage than they think, because Malaysia wants domestic workers," she said.

Anti-human trafficking police raised the most concerns at the meeting, saying that they wish to be included in the drafting process if they are to help ensure the safety of workers, at least as long as they are at recruitment agencies in Cambodia.

"And even if they [Malaysia] sign a good MoU, once the women are there, who makes sure that they are safe?" one police official said.

Another meeting between Cambodian and Malaysian officials is due to take place in several weeks.



This picture taken on January 19, 2011, shows paramedical staff trainees walking in front of a maid agency office in Kuala Lumpur. Nearly two million foreigners, mostly from Indonesia, are registered to work in Malaysian homes, shops, factories and plantations, and many more are undocumented, making Malaysia one of Asia's biggest importers of labour. – AFP



# Treacherous

# waters

Trafficked fishermen underscore region's migration risks

By SHANE WORRELL / Phnom Penh

It has become a familiar story in Cambodia: a missing fisherman is returned home – sometimes in the company of others – recounting a horror story of being worked as a slave on Thai boats as far away as Africa.

What the fisherman had signed up for, usually a simple job off the coast of Thailand, turned into something much grimmer, his dream to provide for his poor family shattered by overwork and physical abuse.

Thailand is one of the biggest exporters of fish products in the world. It also has low unemployment, resulting in many of its unskilled jobs being filled by migrants from countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos.

For those willing to cross the border – sometimes illegally – conditions are often not what they first expected.

A 2013 report from the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) found that migrants made up most of the 200,000 fishermen on Thai boats in the Asia Pacific region. Many of those workers had been trafficked and were working in “appalling conditions, with no pay and

subjected to brutal subjugation.

Violence, forced detention and even murder are commonplace,” according to the report.

The Thai authorities, EJF alleged, were aware of the abuse, but are failing to address it. In some cases, officials were even profiting from it.

In a Cambodian court this month, directors of a defunct fishing company called Giant Ocean International were accused of trafficking poor Cambodian men into slavery aboard their ships.

Victims have testified in court that they had been tortured, and in some instances forced to work 24 hours without a break. Some alleged they had been paid none of the money owed to them.

Rights groups accuse the company of trafficking more than 1,000 workers. A verdict is yet to be announced, but the case – though bigger than most – is not an isolated one.

In other instances, traumatised workers arriving at Phnom Penh International Airport have told local media



A woman rows her fishing boat on the Tonle Sap river in Phnom Penh. – AFP

It is unclear, the ADB adds, what impact the AEC will have on overall labour flows because it “only deals with movement of skilled labour”.

“It remains an open question as to how an economic community, however defined,...can be achieved when the majority share of labor is excluded.”

Risks to unskilled workers in Southeast Asia stretch far beyond fishermen. Maids regularly report abuse at the hands of their bosses, while factory workers complain of bosses confiscating their passports or charging them additional accommodation costs undisclosed when contracts were signed.

In February, seven Cambodians were killed at a construction site in Thailand. Hired by a major company, Italian-Thai Development (ITD), they were crushed by a falling beam while working on a hospital expansion.

While authorities cleared ITD of any wrongdoing relating to the accident, Cambodia's Foreign Ministry later said that five of the workers had crossed the border illegally and did not have work visas.

The company responded by saying the workers were subcontractors – not direct employees of ITD – and refused to address the matter further.

Other issues remain for unskilled migrants. Cambodians working in Thailand last year had no way of voting in their country's national election because polling stations were not set up at embassies, meaning the voices of more than 200,000 people were silent on balloting day.

With ASEAN moving towards a new economic future, it faces the challenge of how to listen to these silent voices and protect them from exploitation, while acknowledging their role in a more economically integrated community.

how they ended up in Mauritius, the Philippines or Indonesia, escaping only when their boats came in to dock.

The flow of unskilled migrant labour is common within the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). By the end of next year, it aims to form the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). One of the features of the community will be an environment in which skilled workers can flow freely across borders in accordance with the needs of each country.

While the region's leaders tout the positive aspects of such a community, there are concerns that they will continue to overlook the needs of unskilled workers who will likely continue moving around at a much higher rate than their skilled counterparts.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has described labour flow reforms in the past decade as “piecemeal” and “lagging behind” trade and investment policy.

“Although ASEAN has signed several formal accords since 2000... implementation has been lackluster,” a report released late last year says.