



Analyzing the Role of Mekong Subregional States in Combating Human Trafficking in Cambodia: A Human Security Perspective

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Abstract

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This article aims to analyze the role of Mekong Subregion countries in addressing the issue of human trafficking in Cambodia by applying the concept of human security. Human trafficking in Cambodia poses not only a serious threat to domestic security and stability but also has broader implications for international relations in the region. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method to examine the roles and policies of Mekong Subregion countries namely Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar in tackling human trafficking within the area. By using the human security concept, which emphasizes the protection of individuals from violence, exploitation, and systemic vulnerabilities, this study shifts the analytical focus from state-centered security approaches to the safety, rights, and dignity of individuals. The findings indicate that cooperation among Mekong Subregion countries plays a vital role in the prevention and suppression of human trafficking through coordinated cross-border operations, information sharing, and law enforcement capacity-building. Nonetheless, the study also highlights ongoing challenges, such as differing domestic policies, limited resources, and bureaucratic barriers. Despite these constraints, collective regional efforts have shown progress in addressing trafficking issues. The article concludes that enhancing cooperation and policy harmonization guided by a human security perspective is essential for achieving more effective and sustainable outcomes in combating human trafficking in Cambodia.

Keywords: *Human Trafficking, Mekong Subregion, Regional Cooperation, Cambodia, Non-Traditional Security*

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of *human security* offers a critical framework for understanding the issue of human trafficking in Cambodia, particularly as the nature of contemporary threats has shifted from external military aggression to internal, non-traditional risks that directly affect individuals. Unlike traditional *national security*, which centers on the protection of state sovereignty, *human security* places the individual at the core of security policies. As articulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its landmark *Human Development Report 1994*, human security encompasses protection from threats across seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. It emphasizes two fundamental freedoms: *freedom from*

fear protection from violence and coercion and *freedom from want* access to basic needs such as education, health care, and livelihood (UNDP, 1994). In the Cambodian context, human trafficking represents a profound threat to human security. It deprives individuals especially women, children, and migrants of their basic rights, exposes them to physical and psychological violence, and traps them in cycles of exploitation (Lippincott, 2023). The reality of modern slavery, including forced labor, online scamming, and sexual exploitation, persists in Cambodia despite numerous national and regional commitments. As noted by Lippincott (2023), “*modern slavery in Cambodia is not just a statistic but a humanitarian crisis that requires immediate and sustained action.*”

Regional cooperation through mechanisms such as the COMMIT Process and bilateral agreements among Mekong Subregion countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar) has largely focused on law enforcement and border control. However, from a human security perspective, these efforts often neglect the protection and empowerment of victims. Responses remain state-centric and security-oriented, while rehabilitation services, psychological support, legal aid, and long-term reintegration are limited or inconsistent. In some cases, trafficking victims are treated as offenders, especially when they are foreign nationals, reflecting a significant gap between policy and human security principles. Importantly, the human security framework recognizes that the state is not the sole actor in ensuring individual safety. Non-state actors, including NGOs, international organizations, journalists, and local communities, play essential roles in identifying victims, advocating for justice, and delivering direct support. However, in Cambodia, these actors often face intimidation, censorship, or legal threats when exposing trafficking networks or criticizing government complicity. This reality underscores the failure of the state to fulfill its protective function and reveals the structural weaknesses in Cambodia’s human security regime. Therefore, addressing human trafficking in Cambodia requires a paradigm shift from reactive, state-based enforcement to a people-centered approach that acknowledges the rights, needs, and agency of victims. Only through this shift can regional cooperation move beyond symbolic agreements and contribute to sustainable protection and justice. As the UNDP (1994) emphasizes, “security is not about weapons it is about people.” Applying this principle to the anti-trafficking response in Cambodia reveals the urgent need for policies rooted in dignity, inclusion, and human rights.

According to a 2011 study by ECPAT Cambodia, about 75 percent of sex trafficking victims in Cambodia are children. The study also showed that the age of the victims has decreased over the years. Victims of sex trafficking are often girls from poor families who are tricked into working as prostitutes. Many girls are also sold into brothels by their parents, often to pay off debts. This shocking trade is at least partly linked to Cambodia’s tragic history. Genocide during the Khmer Rouge era from 1975 to 1979 killed an estimated two million people. The largely Buddhist-educated and religious community was nearly wiped out, as were social institutions, leaving a divided society after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed. Although the country has shown signs of development, there is a huge wealth gap, and Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in Asia (Ryan, 2014). In the Mekong Subregion, human trafficking is not only a challenge to

national security but also a concern for human security. Human security theory focuses on protecting individuals from threats such as violence, poverty, and human rights violations, shifting the emphasis from state security to individual security. This approach recognizes that human well-being is essential for stability and sustainable development. Security is not just about the absence of conflicts and threats; it also encompasses meeting human needs, including food, shelter, health, and a safe environment. The shift from traditional national security to human security indicators and terminology reflects a greater emphasis on human values (UNDP, 1994). Cooperation between Mekong Subregion countries in addressing human trafficking reflects the practical application of human security theory. The countries have developed regional mechanisms to coordinate law enforcement efforts, build the capacity of local institutions, and provide protection for victims of human trafficking.

However, many of these cooperative frameworks still prioritize state interests such as migration control and law enforcement over the safety, rehabilitation, and rights of trafficking victims. As Lippincott (2023) explains, *“modern slavery in Cambodia is not just a statistic but it is a humanitarian crisis that requires immediate and sustained action.”* From a human security perspective, this crisis must be addressed not only through regional treaties and task forces but by fundamentally centering victims' lived experiences in policymaking and implementation. Thus, the real challenge lies not in the absence of cooperation but in the quality and orientation of that cooperation (Lippincott, 2023). Without integrating victim-centered protection, social reintegration programs, and long-term strategies to address root causes such as poverty, gender inequality, and systemic impunity regional collaboration will remain performative and insufficient. A human security approach demands deeper commitment to human dignity, empowerment, and inclusive development across the Mekong region.

METHODS

The research method employed in this study is the descriptive-qualitative approach, selected to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the role played by Mekong Subregion countries in addressing the persistent issue of human trafficking in Cambodia. A qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate for this study, given its ability to explore, interpret, and explain complex social phenomena that are deeply embedded in political, legal, and humanitarian contexts. Human trafficking as a transnational and multidimensional issue, requires analysis beyond numeric data, emphasizing instead the meanings, motivations, and institutional responses involved in its dynamics. This study adopts a case study method, which is one of the defining characteristics of qualitative research. The case study approach enables the researcher to conduct a focused investigation into a specific context in this case, the efforts and challenges faced by Mekong Subregion countries (such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar) in combating human trafficking in Cambodia. By closely examining a particular regional context, the research aims to uncover patterns, policy inconsistencies, cooperative mechanisms, and institutional behaviors that shape regional anti-trafficking responses. Moreover, the descriptive element of the

methodology facilitates the development of a comprehensive and detailed portrayal of how strategies, policies, and intergovernmental frameworks have been implemented to tackle trafficking in persons. Data sources include secondary materials such as official government reports, regional cooperation documents, international conventions, policy briefs, academic articles, and NGO publications. These documents are critically analyzed to assess the effectiveness of current approaches and to identify key gaps in protection, prosecution, prevention, and partnership efforts. Through this methodology, the study seeks to contribute to a richer academic discourse on regional human security, with a particular focus on institutional responses to human trafficking in Southeast Asia.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Human security is a major concern in today's international politics. This is evident in the growing focus of the global community, not only in academic research on human security but also in its application in international relations. This paper addresses several key issues related to human security in international politics. The first issue is the concept of security, which has undergone various changes and can be better understood as traditional and non-traditional security. Human trafficking is an example of a non-traditional threat to human security. (Mahendra, 2017) In particular, human trafficking is associated with crimes and violations of human rights. It contradicts human rights principles enshrined in international treaties made by the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Treating human beings like inanimate objects that can be exchanged for a sum of money in the process of buying and selling is an act that greatly degrades the dignity of a person. Human beings have honor and conscience and should be treated accordingly (Winarno, 2014). Placing human beings as trading commodities for economic gain is a crime that includes severe violations of various basic human rights, one of which is the right to freedom. Perpetrators often use coercion and violence to force someone to submit to their will. This is also a violation of human rights because everyone should have the right to self-determination and be free from various pressures, actions, and situations that threaten their physical and mental safety. Human trafficking is a significant transnational crime in Southeast Asia. The region serves as a source, transit, and destination for human trafficking.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transfer, harboring, or receiving of a person through violence, coercion, or other malicious acts for exploitation. According to the International Organization for Migration, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia are major contributors to human trafficking, while Malaysia is a popular destination for trafficking. The prevalence of human trafficking in Southeast Asia is linked to regional issues such as poverty, economic disparities, and prolonged conflicts, particularly in Myanmar. These factors contribute to a vicious cycle of trafficking and other transnational criminal activities with no clear solution in sight. Human trafficking is a significant transnational crime in Southeast Asia. The region serves as a source, transit, and destination for human trafficking. The Unit Human trafficking in Cambodia remains widespread, and rescued survivors

are held in poor conditions in immigration detention centers. The mass, forced eviction of thousands of families from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor occurred. Freedom of expression and association was further restricted as the license of one of the last independent news outlets was revoked and the only remaining opposition party was banned from taking part in national elections. A major political opposition figure received a long prison sentence after an unfair trial. Unfair trials of labor activists also result in convictions (Amnesty, 2023). The continued rise of illegal logging and mining operations in forests is a violation of the human rights of Indigenous Peoples. Despite the government's crackdown, the human trafficking crisis continues. According to credible reports, migrant workers recruited fraudulently and trafficked for forced labor continue to be held in protected compounds where they are forced to work in cyber fraud and online gambling operations run by criminal gangs.

It was also reported that a previously closed complex in the city of Sihanoukville had reopened, raising questions about the effectiveness of a task force set up by the Ministry of Justice in 2022 to coordinate the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the human trafficking of migrant workers to Cambodia. Trafficking victims have had their passports confiscated and forced to work under the threat of violence in illegal operations that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. So far this year, authorities have released more than 100 trafficked people from illegal compounds and transferred them to immigration detention centers. However, rescue survivors, some of whom had been victims of rape and other physical violence, often spent months held in overcrowded state-run detention centers, where they were required to pay for food and water and had no access to a legal advisor (CNN, 2013). When committing transnational crimes, perpetrators often use false promises to lure potential victims. For example, a perpetrator might offer job recommendations for work abroad in Cambodia, promising positions as factory workers, customer service representatives, telemarketers, or operators with high salaries. However, once the victims arrive in Cambodia and start working, they do not receive the promised high salaries.

Human Trafficking in Cambodia: Impact on ASEAN Regional Security

According to the ASEAN and Trafficking in Persons Report, Cambodia is a destination, transit, and source country for trafficking. Since 2005, the Cambodian government and non-governmental organizations have worked with international institutions, such as UNICEF, to combat child trafficking. Trafficking victims from Cambodia are often exploited as sex workers or domestic workers (for women) and forced laborers (for men) in countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand. Factors such as the weak economy, lack of education, inadequate law enforcement, and globalization contribute to the prevalence of trafficking in Cambodia. (Afriansyah, 2022). Human trafficking is a serious threat that affects social, economic, and political stability in the ASEAN region. In Cambodia, human trafficking takes many forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and child trafficking. This phenomenon harms individual victims and has a broad impact on ASEAN regional security. The Cambodian National Police actively plays a major role in preventing activities that lead to conflict, which can damage national solidarity, peace with neighboring countries, and national security to prevent threats from terrorism. To

maintain national security and public order, the Cambodian National Police makes continuous efforts to combat all forms of crime, including criminal activities, drug abuse, human trafficking, and other forms of transnational crime, to protect citizens and the victims of transnational crime. Cambodia, as a member of ASEAN, has participated in the regional cooperation framework for eradicating human trafficking (Pinatih, 2023). Even though Cambodia is the last member country to join ASEANAPOL, this shows the goodwill of the Cambodian government. The Cambodian government also established an anti-human trafficking unit under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation, showing the success of Cambodia's law enforcement agencies and justice system in apprehending and prosecuting human traffickers, which has resulted in a reduction in new child sexual abuse cases.

Beyond international legal instruments, Southeast Asia has made significant progress in combating human trafficking, particularly as it relates to women and girls. The ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, adopted in 2015, aims to complement the global anti-trafficking framework with a focus on the protection and empowerment of women and girls. Article 6, for example, emphasizes the need for a gender-sensitive approach to human trafficking, which is in line with the sentiment of the Palermo Protocol, and Article 7 mandates the establishment of national laws and policies that focus on the protection, rehabilitation, and empowerment of women and child victims (Frada, 2024). Home Affairs Minister Sar Kheng said on August 22, 2022, that his party had deployed officers to inspect hotels, casinos, and other places across the country for potential victims of human trafficking. In this action, several suspected smugglers were even arrested. This issue has sparked tensions among member countries in the outer ASEAN region, especially regarding border issues and illegal migration, including Taiwan, which complained that more than 300 of its citizens were detained in Cambodia after being lured to work for companies operating in the technology sector with the promise of a salary. However, in reality, they only work as operators to contact potential victims who have been targeted by China. Cambodia's ruling party officials generally deny that human trafficking networks operating in their country are a widespread problem, despite concrete evidence to the contrary. They even accused the victims of making false reports as a ruse to violate their contractual obligations. According to Al Jazeera's report, in the case of the Chinese online fraud network, the actors behind human trafficking were close to high-ranking Cambodian government officials, such as the ruling party.

Some Cambodian tycoons with connections to the illegal operation holding facilities are even nephews and advisors to Prime Minister Hun Sen. And although some of the Chinese investors behind the practice have been convicted of financial crimes in their country, they are welcomed with open arms to do business in Cambodia. Since early August, the Philippines has been urging Cambodian authorities to rescue four of its citizens detained at a casino complex in Koh Kong province. More than 40 Vietnamese nationals fled from a casino in Kandal Province. They swam across the Binh Di River to Vietnam. Hong Kong officials say 10 of their citizens are still trapped in Cambodia. Cambodian Foreign Ministry spokesman Chum Sounry said in the past six months, his party had

received requests for intervention in forced labor cases from at least nine embassies, including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. The Interior Ministry says around 900 foreign nationals have been rescued from human trafficking networks so far this year. (Narin, 2022) ASEAN's response to human security challenges is reflected in several institutional and policy developments, particularly through the establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). This commission signifies ASEAN's evolving commitment to strengthening the regional protection of human rights, a principle enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, which underscores the importance of democracy, rule of law, good governance, and respect for fundamental freedoms. AICHR represents a significant step in aligning ASEAN's regional norms with global human rights standards, despite the organization's longstanding principle of non-interference in domestic affairs.

The AICHR is tasked with six key objectives that collectively support a human security framework within the region. These include: promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms of the peoples of ASEAN with upholding the right of ASEAN citizens to live in peace, dignity, and prosperity. It realizing ASEAN's broader goals as outlined in the ASEAN Charter particularly the maintenance of regional stability and harmony through inter-member cooperation with encouraging human rights promotion at the regional level while respecting each country's unique cultural, historical, and religious contexts to enhancing regional cooperation through complementary national and international efforts in the promotion and protection of human rights. Then finally, upholding international human rights principles, including those articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Vienna Declaration, and various other global instruments that address transnational issues such as human trafficking. (Mahendra, 2017). While the establishment of AICHR reflects normative progress, its operational capacity and influence remain limited. The commission lacks enforcement power and often functions within the boundaries of consensus-based diplomacy, which constrains its ability to respond decisively to urgent human security threats such as trafficking in persons, statelessness, and systemic rights violations. Nonetheless, AICHR serves as a platform for dialogue and norm-building, which is crucial in a region as politically and culturally diverse as Southeast Asia. Its existence contributes to the gradual institutionalization of human security norms, laying the groundwork for more robust and coordinated responses to regional human rights challenges including the protection of vulnerable groups affected by human trafficking networks.

According to ASEAN, it is crucial to utilize regional measures to combat human trafficking. These measures should include legally comparable strategies and priorities to assist ASEAN member countries that serve as transit points, sources, and destinations for human trafficking. The main objective of ACTIP WC is to prevent and address human trafficking, particularly among women and children, and to prosecute the perpetrators. Therefore, ACTIP serves as a means of cooperation between ASEAN countries in combating human trafficking and as an ASEAN policy initiative to address the issue, which is prevalent in the ASEAN region. Through this convention, ASEAN acknowledges the urgent need to

address human trafficking, especially involving women and children, and recognizes the importance of tackling transnational crime at the regional level. ASEAN faces a significant challenge in addressing cases of trafficking in women and children, and it upholds the fundamental principle of non-intervention (Afriansyah, 2022). However, since the ratification of this convention by ASEAN countries in 2015, trafficking cases involving women and children have continued to be prevalent in the ASEAN region. It can be argued that ASEAN's efforts to combat trafficking in women and children, as outlined in the convention, have not been entirely successful. ASEAN requires more time to develop an effective strategy to eliminate trafficking in women and children. Failure to address trafficking cases involving women and children will lead to criticism from the international community, as ASEAN has often struggled to resolve these cases.

At the core of anti-trafficking regimes is border protection by controlling illegal migration flows. Article 11 of the Palermo Protocol, for example, requires countries to strengthen border controls to prevent and detect human trafficking and to legislate to prevent the use of commercial vessels for human trafficking. Protecting countries' security from human trafficking also means helping them fight other related crimes, including smuggling, prostitution, organ trafficking, and money laundering. In addition to these two international legal regimes, Southeast Asia adopted the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, in 2015. (CABALLERO-ANTHONY, 2018)

The Role of Mekong Subregion Countries in Addressing Human Trafficking in Cambodia

Cambodia's vulnerability to weather variability and climate change, as highlighted by UN Women, underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive strategy to address the specific challenges women and girls face in responding to natural disasters. This can also be exemplified in Myanmar, where the impact of natural disasters acted as a catalyst for women to leave their country, highlighting the complex relationship between climate change, migration, and gender. In both countries, specific adaptation challenges facing women and children have been identified, stemming from women's low access to financial resources, land and natural resources, credit, and financial information, as well as women's household responsibilities, meaning that when disasters impact the region, it is mostly women who do not have a social safety net. This is compounded by the fact that in Cambodia, women are not involved at national and sub-national levels when preparing for and responding to disasters, resulting in an ineffective understanding of gender-specific needs. At the subregional level, the Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking in Persons reflects the framework of the Palermo Protocol, encouraging greater cooperation between countries in the Greater Mekong region through bilateral agreements (Frada, 2024). This often includes specific provisions addressing the protection and empowerment of women and girls. This regional collaboration underscores the importance of collective efforts in addressing the complex challenges associated with the human trafficking of women and girls in Southeast Asia. In addition, it reflects a different understanding of the gender-specific aspects of human trafficking, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and targeted approach in the fight against the trafficking of women and girls in Southeast Asia.

The Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Human Trafficking (COMMIT) is a high-level policy dialogue in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). It involves all governments in the region, as they recognize that combating human trafficking effectively requires collective efforts. COMMIT aims to prevent human trafficking, protect victims, facilitate their repatriation and reintegration, and prosecute the criminals responsible. It serves as the central framework for a cohesive and comprehensive anti-trafficking response. The COMMIT process began with informal discussions among representatives of several GMS governments in mid-2003. Over three roundtable discussions, governments addressed challenges and reached an innovative agreement, which became a blueprint for collaboration to combat human trafficking in the GMS (MIGRATION, 2004). The memorandum of understanding (MOU) signifies the governments' recognition that human trafficking impacts human security and human rights at individual, societal, national, and state levels. COMMIT has provided a platform for building trust and confidence between countries on the issue of human trafficking and has established an effective system for joint activities. Additionally, COMMIT facilitates the participation of civil society and youth in regional policymaking through the COMMIT CSO/Youth Platform.

In the Mekong Subregion, countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos have worked together to combat human trafficking, particularly in Cambodia. This collaboration involves various initiatives and programs aimed at preventing, addressing, and eliminating human trafficking in the region. UNIAP (United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking) supports the governments in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) to develop mechanisms and enhance their response to human trafficking. This includes implementing national plans and establishing coordinating bodies for more effective regional cooperation. UNIAP plays a crucial role in fostering cooperation, such as through the establishment of COMMIT, which focuses on strengthening cross-border cooperation and anti-human trafficking actions. Under the COMMIT initiative, Thailand signed an MOU with neighboring countries, and Cambodia and Thailand entered into bilateral cooperation in March 2009 to combat human trafficking. This collaboration allows for the exchange of information between stakeholders and helps identify areas that require greater cooperation (Arby, 2020). Additionally, Thailand and Laos collaborate in identifying and repatriating victims of human trafficking and engage in joint training activities for radio staff to raise awareness about human trafficking. Another project, the Cross-Border Collaboration on Tracing Missing Trafficked Victims in Thailand (THALACC), was carried out to create a bilateral mechanism for coordinating, identifying, and tracking missing people, resulting in the successful location of 30 individuals who were provided with welfare assistance..

Not only about reintegration, COMMIT also seeks to fight perpetrators of human trafficking crimes, including bride trafficking. Liu Zhongyi, head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Ministry of Public Security, explained that police from the six GMS countries under COMMIT have carried out joint operations to fight human trafficking. The operation, which was carried out from July to December 2018, aims to share new clues about the crimes of human trafficking and bride trafficking, strengthen regional cooperation, exchange

intelligence information, investigate organizational networks related to human trafficking, both inside and outside China, punish perpetrators who commit crimes of human trafficking and bride trafficking by law, and rescue victims. The operation succeeded in uncovering a total of 634 cases of kidnapping and human trafficking and 1,130 suspects, including 153 suspects from outside China. 1,130 women from outside China were kidnapped, and 17 children were rescued. A total of 126 cases of bride trafficking were successfully uncovered, and 202 suspects were arrested, 109 of whom were foreign nationals. So at the regional level, through COMMIT, the efforts made are in the form of reintegration, or ensuring that victims can return to their country of origin safely, accompanying them, and providing the social and economic support that victims need so that they can reintegrate in their environment. In other words, ensuring that victims can stand on their own two feet in their environment (Rani, 2022). However, sometimes this cannot happen quickly and takes years, considering that victims who have just emerged from trafficking situations sometimes lose their identity cards, do not have the basic ability to read and write, and even experience psychological disorders. COMMIT also assists victims according to their condition when leaving a trafficking situation, for example, by ensuring that victims get their identity cards back so that victims can access the necessary assistance. In addition, police from the six COMMIT member countries carried out joint operations in 2018 to arrest human traffickers. As a result of this operation, 126 cases of bride trafficking were uncovered. Responding to this at COMMIT, Thailand hosted a regional seminar on "Protecting Children from Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation Tourism" in 2007. Thailand also signed MoUs with neighboring countries such as Vietnam by making plans that include the formation of working groups, situation studies, cooperation in protecting and repatriating victims of human trafficking, as well as cooperation in investigating and arresting perpetrators. In March 2009, Cambodia and Thailand implemented bilateral cooperation, which enabled stakeholders to exchange information in dealing with cross-border human trafficking and played a role in identifying areas that required greater cooperation (Pinatih, 2023). Thailand and Laos have also collaborated in efforts to repatriate human trafficking victims. Another project is the Cross-Border Collaboration on Tracing Missing Trafficked Victims in Thailand. (THALACC), to create a bilateral mechanism for coordinating, identifying, and tracking missing persons. In its implementation, both countries and international organizations were involved. At least 30 people were rescued and given welfare assistance.

While Cambodia's primary cooperation in addressing human trafficking has been with its neighboring Mekong Subregion countries through frameworks such as the COMMIT Process, the country has also engaged in strategic bilateral initiatives beyond the region. These efforts highlight the limitations of regional mechanisms in fully addressing the complexity of trafficking issues, especially when institutional or political constraints persist. One such example is Cambodia's collaboration with Australia, which reflects a pragmatic approach to transnational crime control when regional coordination proves insufficient (FAQIRIAH, 2022). In March 2015, Cambodia and Australia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on immigration, aimed at enhancing

bilateral cooperation in combating irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. The Cambodian Minister of Home Affairs emphasized that this MoU would strengthen the Cambodia–Australia Immigration Forum as a platform for technical exchange and mutual policy development. The partnership includes capacity-building programs, technical assistance, and joint activities designed to address trafficking from both enforcement and preventive dimensions. Although Australia is not a Mekong Subregion state, its involvement reveals how Cambodia is actively supplementing regional collaboration with external partnerships to fill critical protection and enforcement gaps. This bilateral engagement can be interpreted as a response to the limited institutional power and slow operationalization of human security principles within Mekong cooperation structures. It also illustrates a broader trend in which states facing internal human security crises seek support from capable external actors, reinforcing the need for more effective, inclusive, and victim-centered regional governance.

The Effectiveness of International Agreements in Addressing Human Trafficking in Cambodia

The importance of international cooperation with the destination countries of Cambodian traffickers is considered key to protecting them from punishment. Moreover, this collaboration will be used to reach a consensus on identifying victim criteria. Cambodia has cooperation agreements with Thailand and Vietnam in which all parties emphasize that women and child victims are treated as victims and not perpetrators and must not punish victims for illegal border entry or exit or any other offenses arising directly from human trafficking. Concerns have been raised about foreign victims of human trafficking being punished in Cambodia. The 2020 United States human trafficking report refers to media reports of young people from Malaysia who paid high recruitment fees for high-paying jobs and were then only transferred to Cambodia as traffickers and detained for immigration violations. Some respondents referred to situations where foreign victims experienced some form of exploitation and discrimination; one respondent noted that Vietnamese, Chinese, and African victims sometimes feared discriminatory treatment (MCAdam, 2022). While there are state and non-state services for Cambodian citizens, there are few organizations that provide support for foreign citizens. The risk of punishment is also higher for foreign nationals in Cambodia who are exploited in prostitution and surrogacy, with the complex question arising as to whether surrogacy can be included in the definition of human trafficking. In this regard, it is noted that several women used as surrogate mothers have been prosecuted for violating the law not only in Cambodia but also in other regions of ASEAN, in the absence of laws that allow their identification as victims. While authorities stated that trafficking victims were being protected in Cambodia, concerns were also raised about the plight of Cambodian trafficking victims abroad. Cambodian victims reportedly face punishment for immigration or criminal offenses abroad, including in China, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore. In some cases, they have been identified as victims. Potentially trafficked into forced labor, they have also reportedly been convicted of illegal logging and working illegally in casinos in China without being identified as trafficking victims.

In the period from 2015 to 2020, the Cambodian government took significant steps to address human trafficking. Specifically, in 2015, the government enacted the law NAP 2014–2018 to combat exploitative practices. This initiative involved strengthening existing laws and enhancing prevention strategies. Cambodia's commitment to tackling human trafficking is evident through its ratification of international agreements and conventions such as the CRC, CEDAW, Palermo Protocol, Bali Process, and ACTIP. As a result of ratifying these international treaties and conventions, Cambodia incorporated them into its national laws. To address cross-border challenges, the country has prioritized bolstering individual security and prevention efforts. Cambodia has achieved this by developing National Action Plans (NAPs) and enhancing law enforcement through training programs for law enforcement personnel in all provinces. Furthermore, the government has conducted investigations into factories suspected of exploiting minors (FAQIRIAH, 2022). Cambodia's anti-trafficking efforts extend beyond the CRC and CEDAW conventions and encompass the broader context of human trafficking, as evidenced by its implementation of the Palermo Protocol. Although Cambodia has ratified the Palermo Protocol, this agreement primarily encourages member countries to take action against human trafficking by protecting victims and raising awareness, without imposing binding obligations. In terms of law enforcement, Cambodia has a 1996 law, Article 3, which addresses human trafficking, although it does not provide a clear definition of the offense.

Observers reported that local governments, law enforcement, and security forces directly facilitated human trafficking crimes by colluding with criminal networks. NGOs continued to report on human trafficking victims, accusing Cambodian officials of conspiring with labor brokers to commit human trafficking crimes. NGOs also continue to accuse police and other officials of involvement in cyber fraud operations that forced thousands of citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Southeast Asians, and other foreign nationals to work in “call centers” in Sihanoukville and other locations. Observers accused prosecutors and judges of accepting bribes in exchange for dropping charges, acquittals, and reduced sentences (State.gov, 2023). Corrupt officials often thwart progress in cases where the perpetrators are alleged to have political, criminal, or economic ties to government officials. Law enforcement raids on places where authorities believed sex trafficking was taking place were sometimes unsuccessful because of early warnings from rank-and-file police. Some police reportedly protected the companies in exchange for monthly payments from the business owners or sexual favors from the victims. Authorities often ignored, denied, or downplayed labor violations including forced child labor in brick factories and kilns and colluded with brick manufacturers to arrest, imprison, and repatriate contract workers who attempted to flee. Observers reported that customs and immigration officials accepted bribes from traffickers to facilitate the entry of trafficking victims into Cambodia. Traffickers then exploited these victims in cyber fraud operations

The government reported that the MOJ established a special working group to monitor and investigate reports of large-scale human trafficking operations in “high-risk” areas, including the provinces of Preah Sihanouk, Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Svay Rieng, Takeo, and Kandal. Officials

reported investigating 600 cases as part of a three-month operation starting in August 2022, but the government did not provide further details about the cases. Observers reported that government officials with knowledge of police operations had warned cyber fraud operators before police raids. NGOs reported top officials harassing and intimidating human trafficking activists involved in eradicating forced labor in cyber fraud operations. The government reported cooperating with the governments of the PRC, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam in human trafficking investigations but did not report law enforcement cooperation with foreign governments in investigating human trafficking in cyber fraud operations. (State.gov, 2023). Additionally, the legislative process is slow, and reforms may take years to implement. The legal landscape in Cambodia also tends to criminalize whistle-blowers rather than perpetrators, and activists and journalists who document evidence of environmental abuses by companies or human trafficking have been arrested and imprisoned on sedition charges (Index, 2023). Activists and journalists who seek to document and reveal evidence of violations committed by human trafficking companies or syndicates are often targeted by the government. They were arrested and imprisoned on often unfounded charges of sedition or other offenses. These conditions create a climate of fear and intimidation that hinders efforts to enforce the law and prevent human trafficking. Whistleblowers, who should be protected and encouraged to provide important information, instead face the risk of detention and harassment.

If you look at Cambodia's centralized political institutions and the weak structure of Cambodian society, the policy network in Cambodia is dominated by the state. Policy-relevant coalition building in this country is limited to political elites and more or less excludes the role of civil society. The closedness of the political system and the dominance of executive power have limited civil society's access to the decision-making process, especially with the patron-client relationships that exist in this country. The patron-client relationship in Cambodia indicates that the policy network in this country is based on bargaining between interested parties, which then leads to a decision blockade. The government's strong grip on the judiciary in Cambodia makes it difficult for INGOs to prosecute suspects in human trafficking cases. It is not easy for INGOs to ensure that traffickers are prosecuted and tried for their criminal acts. Poor trust between INGOs and judicial institutions increasingly hampers the process of prosecuting suspects. Although INGOs and the Cambodian state have collaborated in handling human trafficking cases, victims and witnesses of human trafficking themselves are often reluctant to cooperate in related cases (Albayumi, 2022). Trafficking victims and witnesses are skeptical of the Cambodian justice system because restitution or compensation is difficult for them to obtain due to complicated legal requirements. It seems that the escape actions of many traffickers are not prevented, so victims and witnesses are not motivated to contribute to efforts to resolve human trafficking cases. In essence, the lack of adequate victim and witness protection, lengthy court processes, Cambodia's weak and corrupt legal system, and fear of retaliation from traffickers hinder victims' willingness to cooperate with authorities in human trafficking cases.

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking is a non-traditional security threat that profoundly undermines human security across multiple dimensions—personal, economic, legal, and psychological. It erodes not only the safety and dignity of individuals but also weakens societal cohesion and regional stability. From the perspective of human security, addressing trafficking in persons requires a shift away from narrow, state-centric responses and toward a victim-centered, rights-based approach that places the individual at the heart of policy formulation and implementation. Ensuring freedom from fear and freedom from want, as articulated in the UNDP's Human Development Report (1994), must be central to any long-term solution. In the case of Cambodia, human trafficking is a complex, multidimensional crisis that cannot be resolved in isolation. Regional cooperation among Mekong Subregion countries including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam has laid important groundwork through policies, memoranda of understanding, and joint initiatives, many of which have been supported by actors such as the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP). These collaborations have contributed to awareness-raising, capacity building, and institutional strengthening. However, the success of such initiatives remains fragile and uneven, particularly in Cambodia, where internal governance challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of regional and international support. Despite progress, the Cambodian government's efforts to address human trafficking remain constrained by endemic corruption, weak rule of law, limited institutional capacity, and a persistent lack of political will. These structural weaknesses not only hinder domestic law enforcement and victim protection but also undermine trust and coordination with international partners. The fact that high-ranking officials linked to trafficking networks often go unpunished due to political connections reveals a critical gap between policy and practice. Similarly, the failure to execute several planned joint operations with neighboring countries reflects a broader pattern of institutional inertia and non-compliance, which directly obstructs the fulfillment of Cambodia's regional responsibilities.

From a human security standpoint, these failures are not merely bureaucratic or diplomatic setbacks—they represent a continued failure to protect the rights and safety of vulnerable populations, particularly women, children, and migrant workers who are most at risk of exploitation. Therefore, addressing human trafficking in Cambodia demands more than cooperative frameworks or legal ratification of international instruments like the Palermo Protocol. It requires deep structural reforms, transparency, and a sustained political commitment to uphold human dignity. Ultimately, the eradication of human trafficking in the Mekong Subregion, and particularly in Cambodia, depends on the integration of human security principles into all levels of anti-trafficking strategies from policy design to enforcement and victim recovery. The Cambodian government must take ownership of this agenda by empowering institutions, protecting civil society actors, and engaging constructively with international and regional partners. Likewise, ASEAN and other Mekong Subregion states must continue to prioritize people-centered approaches that align with the region's broader goals of peace, justice, and sustainable development. Without this transformation, efforts to combat human trafficking will remain reactive, fragmented, and insufficient in delivering meaningful protection to those most in need.

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