Committee: ASEAN
Topic: Human Trafficking and Migrant Worker Exploitation in Southeast Asia.
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Overview of the Problem:

Every year, people cross borders in search of better opportunities, hoping to build a safer and more prosperous future for themselves and their families. Yet, for some, this journey becomes a gateway to exploitation, deception, and forced labor. The migration route between Myanmar and Thailand is one example of how people searching for better job opportunities can become vulnerable to human trafficking and labor exploitation.

According to the United Nations, human trafficking involves moving people or keeping them in a place through force, lies, or threats in order to exploit them. Anyone can fall victim to trafficking, but migrant workers face the highest risks. Many travel without speaking the local language, earn very little money, and have nowhere to turn for legal help. Predatory recruitment agencies often trap workers into debt before they even leave home through unfair fees. For example, some migrant workers in Southeast Asia are trapped on fishing boats and forced to work for long hours. Others, such as domestic helpers, may be isolated inside private homes, where it can be difficult to ask for help or report abuse. More recently, fake job offers online and cases where people are forced to take part in online scams make it harder to identify victims and protect them.

No single country can solve this problem alone because human trafficking networks often operate across international borders. ASEAN member states need to work together with employers, recruitment agencies, and international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). By cooperating, they can dismantle trafficking routes across borders and ensure survivors receive real protection.

One of the biggest challenges is that many migrant workers are afraid to report abuse because they can lose their jobs or face deportation. At the same time, trafficking networks operate across borders, making it difficult for countries to investigate cases and share information. Corruption and weak enforcement of labor laws can also allow traffickers to continue with their activities. Fake job ads online also trick workers into traveling, leaving them trapped before they realize the danger.

Delegates will debate how ASEAN countries can work together to protect migrant workers while respecting each country's laws and independence. They must decide whether more responsibility should fall on countries where workers come from or countries where they go to work and how to make sure employers follow labor laws. Ultimately, delegates must balance regional cooperation with national sovereignty to build real safety for migrant workers.

Introduction:

To successfully understand this topic, delegates must know how modern crimes interact with regional laws. This crisis centers around forced criminality, a terrifying situation where mostly young migrant workers are tricked into traveling for fake jobs, only to be held captive and forced through violence to commit cyber-scams. These illegal operations usually happen inside **Special Economic Zones (SEZs).** While the government created these zones with low taxes to attract honest businesses, criminal organizations have unfortunately exploited this lack of government supervision to build high-security areas where local police rarely interfere.

To solve this crisis, delegates must figure out how to update ACTIP (ASEAN's official anti-trafficking treaty) to protect victims. However, any proposed solution must strictly respect The ASEAN way, our committee's golden rule, means your delegation can't interfere in another country's internal affairs, and everyone must agree on the final decision.

This problem does not only stay inside Southeast Asia; it affects the entire world because these mafias use trapped workers to scam people across the world. It is a

terrible cycle where criminal networks trick mostly young people with fake job offers, lock them up in hidden areas, and force them through violence to steal money from everyday citizens, mainly in the US, Europe, and Latin America, through internet fraud. On top of that, many everyday products we buy, like clothing or shoes, are sometimes produced through the suffering of these exploited migrants. This issue ruins ASEAN's global reputation and creates a major trust problem for international trade.

While ASEAN cannot send an army to attack these areas because they strictly respect each nation's sovereignty, this committee has the political power to unite all 10 member states to work together and stop these criminal networks. Delegates in this committee can create realistic, actionable solutions using real ASEAN tools to make a difference; these include expanding our regional treaty (ACTIP), improving ASEANAPOL's ability to trace electronic currency, and establishing safe passage networks to protect victims once they have been rescued.

By the end of this text, delegates will have an understanding of the causes and consequences of human trafficking and migrant worker exploitation in Southeast Asia, the countries most affected, and the challenges ASEAN faces while addressing these issues. Delegates will also learn about existing regional efforts, the importance of protecting migrant workers, and possible solutions that ASEAN member states can work together to implement.

Historical Background:

During the early 1990s, Thailand became an important destination for migrant workers from neighboring countries, especially Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Many people crossed the border looking for jobs, mainly in agriculture, fishing, and construction. At that time, Thailand did not have an appropriate system to manage all this migration, and many workers entered the country without official documents. Long land border controls also made it easier for people to cross without following regular migration procedures.

The situation also created opportunities for informal recruiters. Some workers were promised good jobs but instead received different working conditions once they arrived. Others had to pay high recruitment fees, which left them with debts they struggled to pay. In more serious cases, employers or recruiters kept their passports, used threats, or forced workers to continue working to pay their debts. These practices can turn labor exploitation into human trafficking or forced labor because workers are no longer free to leave their jobs.

It is important to understand that not every case of low wages or poor working conditions is human trafficking. The situation becomes more serious when force or fraud is used to control a person and exploit them.

Several events have influenced the situation of migrant workers in Southeast Asia. First in 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis affected many countries in the region. Many families lost their jobs or sources of income, which pushed more people to look for work in other countries. Some had to depend on informal recruiters to find employment, making them more exposed to false job offers and exploitation.

During the 2000s and 2010s, Thailand's fishing industry needed more workers to meet the growing demand for seafood. Some recruits promised migrant workers good jobs with good salaries but instead sent them to fishing boats where they faced forced labor, unpaid wages, and restrictions on their freedom. In 2014 and 2015, international journalists reported cases of workers being held against their will on fishing islands in Indonesia. These investigations brought international attention to the conditions in the industry and increased pressure on companies and governments to take action.

There were also important efforts to improve the situation. In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Palermo protocol to address human trafficking. In 2004, ASEAN introduced its Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons, followed by the 2007 Declaration on Migrant Workers. Later, in 2015, ASEAN adopted the Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), and in 2017, it introduced the ASEAN Consensus on Migrant Workers to strengthen their rights and protection.

Different countries and organizations have introduced programs to protect migrant workers and prevent human trafficking. For example, Thailand signed bilateral agreements, also known as Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), with Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. These agreements created procedures for workers to find employment in Thailand through legal channels, with the goal of reducing unsafe migration and improving their protection.

Another example is the COMMIT Process (Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking), which brings together countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region to work on human trafficking cases and improve cooperation between authorities. The International Labour Organization (ILO) also developed the TRIANGLE in ASEAN project, which supports Migrant Worker Resource Centers. These centers provide workers with information about their rights, legal advice, and guidance on where to report problems during their employment.

These efforts have given countries and workers more opportunities to deal with exploitation. However, their success depends on how well governments apply the agreements and whether workers can actually access the support available to them.

The agreements created by ASEAN and the United Nations have helped countries improve cooperation and establish rules against human trafficking and worker exploitation. Programs such as COMMIT and TRIANGLE in ASEAN have also given migrant workers more information about their rights and where to seek help.

However, several problems make these efforts difficult to apply. In some countries, migrant workers' legal status is connected to a specific employer. This means that if they leave their job or report abuse, they may lose their work permit and risk becoming undocumented or being deported. Another difficulty is ASEAN's principle of non-interference, which means that member countries are expected to respect each other's internal decisions. Because of this, ASEAN cannot directly control how each country enforces its labor laws or punish governments for failing to meet regional commitments.

Finally, legal migration procedures can be expensive or take a long time. Some workers choose informal recruiters because they offer faster ways to find employment, but this

can leave them with debts and fewer protections. These difficulties show why agreements alone are not enough to protect migrant workers and why better cooperation and stronger national enforcement are still needed.

The Situation Today:

ASEAN is home to millions of people who move between countries for work and better opportunities. In 2024, the region had approximately 11 million international migrants. However, this number includes children and people who are not part of the workforce. The available regional database recorded 5.6 million migrant workers by February 2025, although the actual number is likely higher (International Labour Organization, 2026).
Another major concern is human trafficking connected to online scam centers. In 2023, OHCHR estimated that online scam operations may have involved at least 120,000 people in Myanmar and about 100,000 in Cambodia. These centers are often located inside large, heavily protected compounds with high walls and armed guards. People are recruited through fake job advertisements, often for positions in customer service or technology, but later find themselves unable to leave. Victims come from dozens of countries and include young people with education and computer skills who believed they were accepting legitimate job offers. A newer UN report from 2026 estimates at least 300,000 people from 66 countries are involved in these operations (OHCHR, 2026).

Thailand was the first country in Asia to officially ratify the ILO Work in Fishing Convention (No. 188) in 2019. Which establishes standards for fishers' safety, rest periods, contracts, and living conditions (ILO, 2019).
More recently, governments have taken action against online scam centers linked to human trafficking. Between September and December 2023, Authorities in northern Myanmar arrested over 40,000 people from China and deported them. In March 2024, Thailand helped transfer around 900 Chinese nationals from scam centers in Myanmar to China (Radio Free Asia, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

In June 2026, the ILO also held a regional workshop in Bangkok to discuss better labor protections, fair recruitment, and inspections for migrant fishers (ILO, 2026).

Today, some of the biggest issues in Southeast Asia are forced labor, online scam centers, and unsafe working conditions. Many people accept job offers hoping to find better opportunities, but some end up trapped in jobs where they are underpaid, threatened, or forced to work against their will. Stopping these crimes is difficult because many scam centers operate in border areas controlled by armed groups, where government authorities have limited access. Criminal networks also operate across several countries, making it harder for police to investigate and arrest those responsible. In addition, some rescued workers fear asking for help because they may be treated as criminals for taking part in illegal activities they were forced to carry out. These challenges make it harder to protect victims and bring those responsible to justice.

Human trafficking and migrant worker exploitation in Southeast Asia affect other parts of the world because these crimes do not stop at national borders. People from different countries are recruited through fake job offers and forced to work in scam centers, where they are made to target victims in places such as North America, Europe, Australia, and Latin America. These scams cause people around the world to lose large amounts of money, often through fake investment opportunities involving cryptocurrency. The issue also affects international trade, as countries such as the United States and members of the European Union have taken steps to prevent goods produced through forced labor from entering their markets. This shows that human trafficking is not only a regional problem but also a global issue that requires international cooperation.

One example comes from Thailand, a group of 11 Myanmar migrant fishers reported that they had not received payment despite working for several months. With support from organizations working with the ILO, they were able to recover the money they were

owed. This case shows how migrant workers can struggle to receive fair payment and why access to legal support is important.

Another example comes from Malaysia, where hundreds of migrant workers from Bangladesh and Nepal arrived after paying recruitment agencies to find them jobs. However, some discovered that the jobs they had been promised were not available. They were left without work or salaries, and some had their passports taken away. This situation shows how false job offers and recruitment fees can put migrant workers in difficult situations, even before they begin working.

Key Stakeholders and Their Positions:

From the ASEAN committee, the ones that have expressed greater concerns surrounding the trafficking crisis are the Philippines and Singapore (U.S. Department of State, 2024). The Trafficking in Persons Report states that both countries have fully met the minimum requirements for the elimination of trafficking, demonstrating a serious commitment to security. The Philippines has been investigating, prosecuting, also enacting new legislation, and creating campaigns that can help raise awareness around online scams that are usually used to persuade possible victims. Singapore has increased trafficking investigations, prosecutions, and convictions. Training officers to help track and stop trafficking as their anti-trafficking national strategy.

International organizations are also an important part of the process of stopping trafficking; for example, there are organizations from the UN that have actively intervened, for example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This organization has been working especially in Myanmar and Thailand, providing counseling to migrants in order to help them to prevent falling prey to fraudulent jobs, falling for scams, or falling for human trafficking rings.

Similarly, NGOs have also been constantly involved in helping victims escape and later on receive legal, medical, and psychological assistance but also conduct awareness campaigns, for example, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW),

which has a representative branch called Southeast and East Asian Centre (SEEAC). This branch has a presence in all of Southeast Asia; it has been a constant advocate for the rights of migrant workers, offering counseling, asylum, and community support services, and a helpful resource for foreigners to integrate into their new countries of residence.

Companies that might be affected:

People are not the only victims in this situation, but also businesses are a part of the collateral damage of trafficking; migrant businesses are frequently targeted by criminal groups. Criminal organizations often use these enterprises as a cover-up for illicit actions or threaten to affect the business or the people involved if the owners or workers don't want to cooperate with a service or monetary reward. In contrast, there are businesses whose main worker target is migrants due to their little knowledge of the country, their laws, or the rights they have as workers. According to the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, industrial-scale cyber scam compounds are one of the businesses that have been found to target migrants. Criminal groups also tend to force recruited migrants to work for them as dealers, recruiters, domestic workers, construction workers, or sex workers with little or no pay, or give them high debts they have to pay in exchange for getting them inside the country or giving them the work.

Communities that often face these situations are not only migrants that came optionally but also could be the case of migrants that had no other option due to it being the safest option they had available. Myanmar could be an example; in 2021 the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI, 2025) estimated that over 3.5 million persons had to escape the country due to armed conflicts, political repression, and economic collapse. Thailand is another case of forced displacement; in 2024 a historic flood affected an approximation of 150,000 families whose primary means of subsistence was agriculture, forcing them to start over in big cities of new countries. Common victims of trafficking are also people from marginalized areas, indigenous communities, or people that live in regions near frontiers. These victims often fall prey to false promises of better wages, higher jobs, and a better life in a very small amount of time, but also because

criminal groups take advantage of the little information these people have on laws, the country, their rights as workers, etc.

Each group tends to feel pressured to start a new life as soon as possible; for example in a recent investigation of an exploitation ring in Thailand, workers said that they accepted the job as fishermen knowing or not knowing it was a very exploitative work, because they felt the pressure to bring money to their families, others said they felt pressured to start a new life as soon as possible and be able to have better salaries or work opportunities in comparison to the ones they had in their past homelands. In contrast, criminal groups are not only conformed by people that are involved voluntarily, but because they are prey of criminal scams, where they are used as means for criminal activities, they have no voice in this situation, because if they refuse, these groups threaten the victims to tell the authorities they are in the country illegally in order to deport them or threaten them to cause harm to them.

Past Attempts and Existing Frameworks:

In response to this crisis, the United Nations has organized conventions and passed laws and declarations, for example, the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, several international and regional frameworks address this issue, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, and the UN Global Plan of Action to combat Trafficking in Persons, along with the Protocol to prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children. Then, in 2004, ASEAN passed the Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children.

Since 2020 the IOM's Regional Office for Asia and Pacific (ROAP) has contributed to the protection of persons in situations of human trafficking, not only helping them to escape but also to return back safely to their countries, or, in the case of minors separated from their parents, what they do is help them to reintegrate back into their families and homelands.

Programs and projects have been implemented to help victims of trafficking; an example could be the program implemented by Thailand's Minister of Justice in collaboration with the Australian Ambassador to Thailand, the Counter Trafficking in Persons Centre of Excellence (CTIP COE), a center with professionals equipped with tools to respond to all types of trafficking, like trafficking for labor, sex, forced marriages, and forced criminality.

Another example of programs made between countries is the one implemented by the Philippines in 2022 and Thailand in 2023 with the collaboration of local groups such as “Project Rescue" or “Happy Horizons," which helps minors and women in situations of trafficking and forced prostitution, giving them medical and psychological assistance and actively helping them incorporate into society and start a new life.

World Hope International, created by a collaboration between Cambodia and the Philippines, is another international project created with the purpose of advocating in favor of better worker laws for migrants, giving useful tools to local authorities to intervene in cases of trafficking, and helping victims of trafficking report these abuses to the authorities and giving them psychological assistance.

Each region has implemented laws and plans of their own to protect the population. An example of these efforts, according to UNDOC's Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (UNDOC, 2025), is that Thailand is one of the countries that is most compromised in trying to stop trafficking and repressing the people behind these types of acts, making constant meetings between neighboring countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, etc.) and national authorities to propose solutions, like reinforcing frontiers and training officers to investigate cyberfrauds and alert the population about possible trafficking dangers disguised as opportunities. Cambodia in recent years has turned into a major destination for human trafficking and illicit scamming activities. In response to this crisis, authorities have done extensive research to investigate criminal groups that are involved in this business, raiding compounds and freeing victims.

Some proposals and projects didn't work. As an example of these failures, the case of the law enforcement plan made by Laos and Myanmar: the plan was to reinforce the law against human trafficking and to dismantle trafficking networks, but this plan failed due to the corruption of authorities (officers, local authorities, and political figures), which eventually led to the taking advantage of criminal organizations due to the little law enforcement and lack of rule of war. Cambodia, according to the information given by the U.S. State Department in its 2026 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cambodia (U.S. State Department, 2026). Cambodia had various attempts in past years to fight against trafficking, making high-profile local crackdowns, but in recent investigations conducted by the U.S. At the State Department, it was revealed that less than a third of the trafficking compounds that the Cambodian government said that it had dismantled were really out of operation, due to complicity between officers and criminal organizations.

Despite the efforts made by the UN, NGOs, and governments, this problem doesn't seem to end or to even get smaller; actually, every year this situation gets even bigger, scams get better, and more people get involved in trafficking rings. The government only tends to focus on rescuing victims and closing the trafficking center on the spot, but what they take for granted or do not take into consideration is that criminal organizations don't stop once a trafficking place is shut down; criminal organizations can continue their illegal businesses in a different place, with different people, creating different methods of recruitment and using different scam methods. That means they are lacking case tracking and investigating the people involved in it; they need to understand that also authorities could be involved in trafficking rings, so they are missing transparency and investigating the people they have in positions of power and trafficked persons. They don't only need to be rescued; they need to be helped to prevent falling in another scam again, they need help to reintegrate into society, and they need legal, medical, and psychological counseling.

Challenges and Complications:

One of the main challenges ASEAN faces when trying to address this problem is that its member countries do not always agree on how to handle it. Each country has different laws, priorities, and ways of dealing with human trafficking and migrant worker exploitation. Some countries also lack the money, technology, and resources needed to investigate cases and protect workers. Cultural differences and difficulties in sharing information between governments can make cooperation even harder. Because of this, finding solutions that work for all member countries is not always easy.

The Committee's Role and Powers:

This committee's powers are to respect, promote, and protect the rights of people, especially of those in vulnerable situations, for example, migrants, children, women, and in general. For limitations, the committee has a series of strict rules that must be respected by all the delegates at all times: be respectful towards other delegates, the moderator, and the chair; the sovereignty of member states must be respected, including their national laws; countries cannot independently arrest or prosecute traffickers; and this committee doesn't have the same power as an international court.
In this debate a resolution paper must be created. A resolution paper is a document that states and explains the problem the committee is trying to solve, and secondly, the delegates should get in an agreement of possible solutions and actions that can be taken in consideration to solve this problem that later on be presented by the delegates to the UN General Assembly, where the resolution should be accepted or denied.
This committee works with other UN groups such as the UNHCR, which protects migrants and refugees; ILO, which protects the rights of workers; UNICEF, which is in charge of protecting children from trafficking; etc.

Guiding Questions for Debate:

1-. How can ASEAN countries protect migrant workers when some of their economies depend heavily on low-cost foreign labor?

2. To what extent should destination countries be held responsible for the exploitation of migrant workers, even when the abuse happens through private companies or employers?
3. How can ASEAN prevent human trafficking without making legal migration more difficult for people who need to work abroad?
4. Should ASEAN establish common laws and standards to protect migrant workers, even if some member countries have different national laws and priorities?
5. How can countries address human trafficking when corruption or lack of government control allows traffickers to continue operating?
6. What responsibilities should countries of origin have when their citizens are exploited while working abroad?
7. How can ASEAN improve cooperation between countries when human trafficking networks operate across borders and governments have different levels of resources?
8. How can ASEAN ensure that migrant workers can report exploitation without fearing deportation, losing their jobs, or facing punishment?
9. Should companies that benefit from migrant workers be required to prove that their recruitment and working conditions are free from exploitation?
10. How can ASEAN balance national sovereignty and the need for regional cooperation when addressing human trafficking?

Conclusion and Call to Action

This situation is not only an isolated case or a problem that is present only in a country and affects just a certain sector of the world population, but a situation that happens all over the world, affecting millions of persons every day, and if this situation is not solved as fast as possible, it will continue expanding, getting worse, causing chaos and suffering to people. Delegates can be part of the change, collaborating and supporting each other to protect their nations, finding peace and justice for all the delegations in the committee. Delegates have to remember that this MUN is not a fictional scenario or a game; this is the reality for over 300,000 people all over Southeast Asia. This debate also offers delegates experience in solving crises, and making meaningful solutions. The future is where you are going to be able to change for good if you are brave enough

to step up for those who can even talk and never get quiet about the injustice of the world.

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