RSIS COMMENTARIES

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New Avenues for Regional Cooperation: Tackling Human Trafficking in Asia

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Synopsis

In Southeast Asia, rising population and technological advances mean that unfortunately human traffickers have a growing target base online and are making greater use of technology. Nevertheless, creatively employing online tools provides an opportunity to counter cross-border trafficking.

Commentary

WITH THE current debate over domestic anti-human trafficking measures in Singapore, innovative responses from elsewhere can offer constructive policy options and inform dialogue at the regional level.

The ASEAN region has a population of over 600 million and growing, Internet users have doubled and the numbers accessing information and communications technologies (ICT) are expected to increase. United Nations reports note that ICT and increasing use of the Internet create new opportunities for offenders and facilitate crime. For instance, online social media allows for new ways to facilitate people trafficking, distribution of child abuse material, and new avenues for recruiting victims.

Online tools: Boosters of trafficking in persons

Technology-facilitated trafficking is more diffuse and adaptive than initially thought. The explosion in mobile phone usage in this region further facilitates real-time communication and coordination by traffickers to recruit, harbour, transport, provide and obtain higher numbers of victims by deception for commercial sexual activity or forced labour.

This in turn broadens their horizon and increases their reach. The sharp incline in mobile broadband subscribers is driving the explosion in global connectivity according to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Levels of cybercrime are also increasing as individual and organised criminal groups exploit new opportunities without the need for complex skills.

Although ASEAN signed the Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons, particularly women and children, significant progress on implementing the Declaration remains wanting. This is especially since East Asian countries are a major source for long-distance, transregional trafficking. In the most recent UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, East Asia and the Pacific account for nearly 40% of worldwide-detected child victims. In addition, victims from this region are the most geographically dispersed, found in more than 60

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countries.

Trafficking networks seek children for illegal adoption, commercial sexual exploitation, drug trafficking and both domestic and international child labour. Children under 18 using social media platforms often fall victim to traffickers. In the first instance, a young person might receive a friend notification from an unknown person but still accept the request. They increase exchanges, agree to meet and after continued social media interaction they meet again. The child is subsequently trafficked. An estimated one quarter of children reported missing in Indonesia are thought to have met their captors on Facebook according to MTV EXIT, an anti-human trafficking campaign with offices in Bangkok.

In February 2014, Chinese authorities rescued 382 babies and arrested more than 1,000 people suspected of buying and selling young children online following a six-month operation in which authorities were made aware of a website promoting private adoptions. Law enforcement authorities subsequently uncovered an online black market that connected buyers and sellers over four websites, online forums and some 30 groups on a popular Chinese messaging platform.

Leveraging ICT to counter trafficking in persons

Law enforcement is increasingly improving and developing methods such as victim-identification databases and data mining/analytics to improve forensic processes. However, governments in this region need a multi-pronged strategy that focuses on prosecutions and raises awareness as well as involves the private sector. For instance, Singapore developed a National Plan of Action for 2012 – 2015 which identifies a '4P' strategy of prevention, prosecution, protection and partnership.

Along with the exponential increase in people accessing the Internet throughout Asia, digital activism will develop and grow. While most innovation in this field emanates from the United States and Europe, many realise the need to adapt these technological advances to the needs of people in Asia. Indeed, with the US government's pro-active policy of combatting human trafficking, alongside corporate social responsibility schemes, there have been several advances in anti-human trafficking responses.

Online tools such as data mapping have led to the identification in 2012 of areas in the Philippines where child abuse material was transmitted according to Operation Endeavour – an Australian, UK and US combined effort with Filipino law enforcement through the Virtual Global Taskforce. It brings law enforcement agencies, NGOs and industry partners to protect children from online child abuse. Operation Endeavour led to 29 international arrests, 11 of which were in the Philippines, dismantling of an organised crime group that coordinated the live streaming of on-demand child sexual abuse.

In October 2013, the Taken Campaign launched the first anti-trafficking mobile phone application to mark Anti-Slavery Day in London. In March 2014, an anti-trafficking mobile phone application was developed by RedLight Traffic in the US. Along with the Polaris Project (a US-based NGO), the app provides users with potential trafficking indicators and red flags to identify victims, a twenty-minute training exercise to recognise trafficking, an anonymous way to report suspected cases to local authorities, and a sharing tool for friends to establish a local community network against human trafficking.

Sustainable multi-stakeholder initiatives

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), UNODC and UNESCO joined forces in March 2014 to promote a global campaign, 'Your Actions Count – Be a Responsible Traveller.' The campaign was launched with private sector support from Marriott International and Sabre Holdings who will promote it to customers through their websites (Travelocity and lastminute.com), online booking tools, their TripCase mobile app and GetThere booking tool.

These types of multi-stakeholder initiatives allow sustainable awareness-raising activities and are particularly significant for this region which is regarded as a source and destination area for trafficked persons.

Several multi-stakeholder approaches in the US and Europe are leveraging ICT as an opportunity to tackle human trafficking through the use of online petitions, data mapping and awareness-raising activities. It is difficult for law enforcement authorities and governments to tackle this threat alone. Therefore meaningful collaboration between a range of stakeholders including public-private cooperation are essential to adequately fight trafficking and to counter the increasing use of ICT by criminals in the region.

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