

TACKLING THE TRANSNATIONAL THREAT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA: THE ROLE OF MALAYSIA AS THE ASEAN CHAIR

Sheila Devi Michael¹

ABSTRACT

Human trafficking remains a grave and persistent issue in Malaysia and across Southeast Asia, demanding urgent and coordinated action. Since the reopening of international borders following the COVID-19 pandemic, trafficking networks have swiftly adapted, employing advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, to lure victims with fraudulent job opportunities, subsequently trapping them in exploitative online scam operations. Disturbingly, even Malaysians have fallen prey to these schemes and have been rescued by syndicates operating across the region. Child trafficking presents an equally pressing concern, with an alarming increase in cases involving vulnerable children, both from within and outside Southeast Asia, being subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labour, and coerced marriages. As the current Chair of ASEAN, Malaysia holds a critical leadership role in galvanising regional cooperation to address this transnational threat. The sophisticated tactics employed by modern traffickers necessitate an equally innovative, collaborative, and technology-driven response from governments, civil society organisations, and the international community.

Keywords: Human trafficking, post-COVID-19 pandemic era, Malaysia, ASEAN Chair

INTRODUCTION

The illicit operations of human trafficking remain deeply entrenched in Malaysia, preying on vulnerable populations and compounding the nation's social, political, and economic challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the reopening of international borders brought much-needed momentum to Malaysia's economic recovery, it also revived the operations of trafficking networks, which are now emboldened, evolved, and more elusive than before (Othman et al., 2023; Michael, 2022). The 2024 United States (US) Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report on Malaysia recorded an increase of 20 trafficking cases compared to the previous year, underscoring the resilience of these criminal networks (US TIP, 2024).

During the pandemic, to curb the spread of the virus, the Malaysian government implemented strict lockdowns and border closures (Teoh, 2021), severely limiting movement and disrupting trafficking activities. However, these disruptions were temporary. Once borders fully reopened, trafficking syndicates quickly reactivated their

¹ Michael (sheilamike@um.edu.my) is a senior lecturer in the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya.

operations, reestablishing routes and enhancing their methods to target vulnerable populations across Southeast Asia.

ONGOING CONCERNS

According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI), Malaysia remains a significant hotspot for modern slavery, with an estimated 202,000 individuals trapped in forced labour (GSI, 2023). The US Department of State downgraded Malaysia to Tier 3 in its TIP report for two consecutive years (2021 and 2022), citing the government's failure to meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking (US TIP, 2021; US TIP, 2022). Key concerns highlighted include forced labour in the palm oil industry, domestic servitude, and sex trafficking. More recently, there has been a growing concern about trafficking linked to online scam networks (US TIP, 2024). The economic fallout from the pandemic left many susceptible to fraudulent job offers, leading to exploitative conditions and forced involvement in cyber scams. In February 2025, Cambodian authorities rescued 60 Malaysians who had been lured into such scams under false pretences (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 2025). These Malaysians were presented with lucrative job offers only to end up in scamming centres. Some of them endured emotional and physical abuse, forcing them to perform criminal activities such as scamming victims.

The surge in online activity during lockdowns created fertile ground for traffickers to exploit digital platforms. Between 2021 and April 2024, Malaysians lost over RM3.18 billion to online scams, affecting more than 95,800 individuals (Vinothaa, 2024). Traffickers increasingly use social media and job portals to lure victims with fake job opportunities. Once deceived, victims often find themselves coerced into participating in fraudulent activities. As of today, approximately 750 Malaysians have been rescued from international job scams, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Mohamed Radhi, 2025).

The rise of advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfakes, has further complicated efforts to combat trafficking. Syndicates now use AI-generated deepfakes to impersonate trusted individuals or organisations, fabricating convincing scenarios to deceive victims (Noor Baharin, 2025). Many individuals fall prey to these tactics and end up trapped in scam operations, forced to conduct cybercrimes such as phishing, investment fraud, and romance scams from hidden locations. The challenge of combating this trend is particularly pronounced across Southeast Asia, where the cross-border nature of such operations, coupled with the use of sophisticated technologies, makes detection and enforcement increasingly difficult (*Govt ramps up efforts to tackle cybercrime as Malaysians lose RM1.5bil in 2024*, 2025). In 2023, Malaysia recorded 19,224 online crime cases from January to September, marking a 23 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2022 (*23% rise in online criminal cases January-September, 2023*). The reported financial losses amounted to RM687 million. Meanwhile, in 2024, the number of online crime cases increased to 35,368, with Malaysians suffering losses exceeding RM1.5 billion.

Child trafficking is another pressing issue that has intensified since the reopening of borders. In 2024, Malaysian enforcement agencies rescued 165 child victims from sex trafficking and forced labour, a slight decrease from 180 the previous year (US TIP, 2024). Malaysia remains a key destination and transit country for traffickers moving children from Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and beyond.

Rohingya children from refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, are particularly vulnerable (Ahmed & Holzl, 2024). Traffickers often use false promises of safety or family reunification to lure them. In some cases, children are abducted and subjected to sexual exploitation or forced into marriages with much older men. These children face a perilous journey to Malaysia, enduring physical and sexual abuse, forced labour, and dire conditions during transit by land and sea. Upon arrival, their challenges are compounded by their refugee status and language barriers, making it difficult to seek help. Trapped in a foreign country, they often become enslaved or forced into unwanted marriages, with limited avenues for rescue or support (US TIP, 2024).

Meanwhile, in East Malaysia, stateless children are equally vulnerable to trafficking syndicates, forced labour and child marriages (*Hear the Pleas of Stateless Kids*, 2024). Child marriage constitutes an offence under the Palermo Protocol when it aligns with the definition of child trafficking, specifically, involving the movement or control of a child for the purpose of exploitation. While often justified under cultural or traditional norms, child marriage may still amount to trafficking in persons when it entails coercion, lack of genuine consent, or exploitative practices, and is therefore subject to prosecution under international law.

Consequently, human trafficking continues to flourish in Malaysia and the broader region in the post-pandemic era, fuelled by economic vulnerabilities exposed during the crisis and the availability of sophisticated technologies. Recognising the cunning adaptability of trafficking syndicates, the Malaysian government has redoubled its efforts to combat the crime. The efforts are clearly stated in the government's National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) 3.0. As a result, these efforts were acknowledged with the country's elevation to Tier 2 in the 2024 US TIP report (*Malaysia Upgraded to Tier 2 in US TIP Report 2024*, 2024).

LEVERAGING THE ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP

Following the reopening of international borders, the government implemented more stringent enforcement measures to prevent human trafficking activities. These include enhanced border surveillance, improved inspection protocols, digital tracking systems, investment in biometric screening, and strengthened inter-agency cooperation to prevent and combat trafficking. While these efforts are commendable, Malaysia can go further, particularly in its role as the 2025 ASEAN Chair. Malaysia must leverage this leadership efficiently (Hakim, 2024). First, Malaysia should collaborate with ASEAN partners to tackle the root causes of trafficking, such as poverty, education gaps, and economic instability. Promoting ethical recruitment practices and enforcing corporate responsibility through labour standards and supply chain transparency are essential steps.

Second, the country should foster greater regional and international connectivity among law enforcement agencies. Intelligence sharing and coordinated operations are vital to dismantling cross-border trafficking networks. Malaysia should spearhead the creation of an ASEAN Human Trafficking Task Force to coordinate swift responses to trafficking incidents. In addition, Malaysia should work closely with civil society bodies to tackle the problem at the grassroots level. Most non-governmental organisations work with victims and gain first-hand information; therefore, it is vital to partner smartly with these stakeholders.

Third, Malaysia should advocate for the development of an ASEAN-wide trafficking database for improved case tracking and coordination. It should also encourage the use of AI and digital tools to identify and combat online trafficking while collaborating with social media platforms to prevent misuse by traffickers.

Fourth, the country must push for the full implementation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), strengthen victim protection mechanisms, and establish regional safe houses and rehabilitation centres. Legal reforms should also be considered to prevent the wrongful detention or deportation of trafficking survivors.

Lastly, Malaysia should lead a region-wide awareness campaign, integrate anti-trafficking education into school curricula, and strengthen whistleblower protections to encourage the reporting of trafficking cases. As the 2025 ASEAN Chair, Malaysia holds a unique opportunity to galvanise collective action across the region. By leading decisively, Malaysia can set the tone for a more robust and united ASEAN response to human trafficking, reinforcing the region's commitment to upholding human rights and ending exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking in Malaysia and around the region is increasingly driven by sophisticated transnational networks and the misuse of advanced technologies, making it a complex and evolving threat that demands a unified regional response. In the wake of post-pandemic vulnerabilities, trafficking syndicates continue to exploit digital platforms, highlighting the urgent need for innovative and coordinated strategies. As the current Chair of ASEAN, Malaysia holds a strategic leadership role in combating this crisis. Beyond strengthening its national response, Malaysia can steer regional efforts by placing anti-trafficking high on ASEAN's agenda, advocating for harmonised legal frameworks, improved intelligence sharing, joint enforcement operations and smart partnering with civil society bodies. Moreover, it has a unique position to bridge ASEAN with international partners, fostering collaboration on cross-border interventions, technological innovation, and capacity-building. By leveraging its chairmanship, Malaysia can help shape a cohesive, forward-looking regional strategy, one that protects vulnerable people, reinforces human rights, and enhances Southeast Asia's collective resilience against human trafficking.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Funded by ECRG UMG006J-2022

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