

Press Release
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Commemorating the World Day against Trafficking in Persons

30 July 2021

Human Trafficking often referred to as “modern day slavery,” is a crime that exploits women, men and children for numerous purposes including forced labour and sexual exploitation. It is a serious crime with grave human rights implications. Sri Lanka too has not escaped the effects of human trafficking as it is reportedly a country of origin and to a lesser extent a transit and destination country for human trafficking. While human trafficking has always been a complex and, constantly evolving phenomenon, in the current era it has become even more complex and challenging to detect, as criminals increasingly adapt and modify new ways to exploit victims.

The global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the likelihood of human trafficking and have created new and unknown dangers for vulnerable individuals. Measures such as lockdowns and travel restrictions which have been in place to mitigate the transmission risks of COVID-19, have also posed increased risks of trafficking to individuals who are in vulnerable situations. Many migrant workers, facing job losses and denied due wages and benefits, were compelled to repatriate to situations of increased debt bondage, a pervasive form of forced labour. Owing to the economic vulnerabilities, returned migrant workers are further at the risk of falling to a cycle of re-trafficking.

Amidst increased risks and vulnerabilities, victims of human trafficking have also been exposed to further exploitation and encountered limited access to protection services. Perpetrators have taken advantage of the global crisis, capitalizing on peoples’ economic vulnerabilities and the

increased amount of time both adults and children spend online. Many children entered the digital world due to the pandemic to continue their education; however poor digital safeguards and lack of awareness among children to safely navigate online spaces have resulted in the victimization of many, to online predators. Children are being increasingly targeted by traffickers through social media and other online platforms.

While the State is obliged to identify and protect victims of trafficking, other non-state actors also play a significant role in supporting the government to fulfil these obligations. Therefore, coordination between and among the State and non-state actors is seen as a critical factor for a collective and comprehensive counter trafficking response. The complexity of the crime, difficulty in identifying victims, challenges in prosecuting perpetrators and the ever-changing nature of the crime itself, requires a more collective and comprehensive response from the government, civil society, private sector and other stakeholders.

To commemorate the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, which falls on July 30, a group of development partners implementing counter trafficking projects have come together once again this year, to put together a joint call for action in line with this year's theme **"Victims Voices Lead the Way."** This group of development partners includes International Organization for Migration (IOM), Save the Children, The Asia Foundation, International Labour Organization (ILO), Helvetas Sri Lanka, United Nations office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Solidarity Center.

The development partners working together to combat trafficking in persons, present the following recommendations for consideration of the Government:

- Increase identification of victims (often subjected to labour and sexual exploitation, in particular those forced into commercial sex work) through effective screenings conducted by law enforcement authorities and front-line responders.
- Ensure, expeditious investigation, prosecution and conviction related to human trafficking under Section 360C of the Penal Code; especially with regard to the recent case of a 15-year-old child victim of sex trafficking, while ensuring maximum sentencing for perpetrators.
- Ensure effective protection to victims of human trafficking in line with the provisions of the Victims and Witness Protection Act and use audio-visual technology where possible to secure victim's testimony to avoid possible retaliation from traffickers and re-traumatization.
- Improve services for victims, including their quality and accessibility, and ensure shelter and specialized services such as family tracing, reintegration, mental health and psychosocial support, legal support, are available for all identified victims.

On the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, let us pledge to reinforce our shared responsibility for the protection of victims of human trafficking.