



The Role of ASEANAPOL in Combating Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Study of Indonesia, Thailand, and Philippines

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Abstract. *Human trafficking poses a serious challenge in Southeast Asia, requiring coordinated regional responses. This study analyzes the critical role played by the ASEAN Chiefs of National Police (ASEANAPOL) in combating human trafficking across Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. ASEANAPOL promotes cross-border collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint operations, enhancing national efforts to disrupt trafficking networks, prosecute perpetrators, and protect victims. In Indonesia, ASEANAPOL supports joint maritime operations and intelligence sharing to tackle both domestic and international trafficking routes. In Myanmar, the organization enhances border security and offers training to law enforcement officers to improve victim identification and assistance. Thailand benefits from ASEANAPOL's coordination of intelligence and joint operations, addressing its position as both a destination and transit country for trafficking. Meanwhile, Vietnam uses ASEANAPOL's resources to counter trafficking in rural and border areas, where it is most prevalent. This comparative analysis explores patterns of trafficking and assesses the effectiveness of ASEANAPOL's interventions. Case studies are provided to highlight operational successes and challenges in sustaining long-term cooperation. The findings underscore the importance of regional police collaboration and suggest areas where ASEANAPOL's initiatives require further enhancement to mitigate human trafficking effectively.*

Keywords: Human trafficking, Southeast Asia, ASEANAPOL, regional cooperation, security studies, cross-border crime.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking has become a pressing issue for the Indonesian government, with the Indonesian National Police (POLRI) reporting that 2,536 Indonesian citizens fell victim to trafficking as of 2023 (POLRI, 2023). Victims often come from economically vulnerable areas and are lured abroad with the promise of lucrative jobs. Upon arrival, their passports are confiscated, they are forced to work under exploitative conditions and face severe punishment if performance targets are unmet[1].

Indonesia took serious notice of these cases following reports from the victims' families, who raised concerns about missing communication with their relatives abroad. The President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, instructed the Chief of the Indonesian National Police to prioritize anti-trafficking efforts. In June 2023, Indonesian authorities arrested 958 suspects linked to trafficking networks operating between Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, revealing the vast scale of these transnational crimes[1], [2].

The trafficking crisis in Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines aligns with findings from the Global Organized Crime Index, which identifies Southeast Asia as a global hotspot for trafficking, ranking it second globally[3], [4]. Key crimes include online sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic slavery, and trafficking for marriage. Many trafficked individuals originate from impoverished communities and are misled by offers of employment in countries like Thailand or Malaysia, drawn by the perception that working abroad offers higher wages(The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

This study focuses on the patterns of human trafficking in Southeast Asia and assesses how ASEANAPOL, as the coordinating body for police forces across ASEAN, facilitates cooperation to address this issue effectively. [2]

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of human trafficking is one of the topics frequently studied in the ASEAN region. Studies conducted thus far generally examine the strategies of individual ASEAN countries in addressing this issue [6]. Over the past five years, prominent studies have revealed trends in cases and the methods commonly used by perpetrators to carry out their crimes [2], [7], [8]. However, there are still few studies that explore events from the last five years, which exhibit characteristics significantly different from previous research.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research draws on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through interviews with Indonesian law enforcement officers, including personnel from Indonesian National Police (POLRI) especially Polri's International Relations Division and Criminal Investigation Agency in Jakarta. The author also conducted interviewed with Police Attache of Indonesian Police in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Manila. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, government publications, and reports from international organizations. The analysis aims to provide a comprehensive role of ASEANAPOL's anti-trafficking initiatives and assess their impact in Southeast Asia.

4.RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Indonesia is one of the ASEAN countries that has shown serious concern regarding the phenomenon of human trafficking, particularly where information technology and social media are leveraged to carry out these activities. Individuals involved are regarded both as perpetrators and victims of human trafficking due to their highly organized and systematic operations. From cases uncovered by law enforcement in Indonesia, at least four methods are used by traffickers to move victims from their home countries to other nations.

First, they utilize official entry channels to gain access to an ASEAN country, presenting complete documentation with the pretense of a tourist visit. Possessing full documentation enables them to cross into countries like Thailand, the Philippines, or Malaysia.

Second, they exploit routes with low security levels. Indonesia has an extensive landmass, with certain areas targeted by traffickers for smuggling people and goods. Indonesia shares a land border with Malaysia in Kalimantan. The vast territory of Kalimantan, coupled with relatively low border security, is one of the routes traffickers exploit for their activities.

Third, traffickers bind their victims with complex employment contracts that are difficult for the victims to understand. They present contracts with lengthy and incomprehensible documents, leading low-education victims to sign them. This method forms part of the traffickers' strategy to psychologically manipulate victims in need of employment.

Fourth, traffickers promise employment in countries that hold a positive reputation in Indonesia. They pledge jobs in destinations that are common targets for Indonesian job seekers. However, in reality, victims are rerouted to other countries they have never heard of. For instance, victims promised jobs in Thailand are actually taken to Cambodia.

According to data from The Counter Data Trafficking Collaborative, the total number of identified victims globally is currently 206,549 cases, spanning 194 countries with victims from 190 nationalities. This figure underscores that human trafficking is a widespread issue affecting numerous countries worldwide (CTC, 2024). In the ASEAN context, including Timor Leste, the number of victims reaches 10,045 cases.

The high number of victims reflects the ongoing weakness in law enforcement efforts across the ASEAN region. Some ASEAN countries have tightened their borders and imposed strict actions against traffickers, while others have yet to fully collaborate due to internal conflicts and political crises.

Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, crime rates involving information technology rose significantly across the world, including in

ASEAN. Perpetrators exploited information technology to carry out their operations, using these platforms to recruit victims. Recruited individuals were then trained as operators in online scams, contributing to the high victim count across several ASEAN countries.

Recognizing the severity of the situation, ASEAN leaders responded in a special meeting. At the 42nd ASEAN Summit held in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, on May 10-11, 2023, ASEAN leaders issued the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology. This declaration emphasizes the trend of human trafficking facilitated by technology. In response to the increasing cases, ASEAN leaders called on all member states to commit to collaborating in combating all forms of fraud leading to human trafficking.

The declaration also highlights the critical role of ASEANAPOL as a framework for law enforcement cooperation in tackling transnational crimes. In addition to ASEANAPOL, ASEAN leaders encouraged the use of a specialized body responsible for conducting operations against cross-border crimes known as the Heads of Specialist Anti-Trafficking Units (HSU).

Southeast Asia reports some of the highest rates of human trafficking globally, with victims originating from multiple countries, including Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand[8]. Over the past five years, traffickers have increasingly used social media to recruit victims by promising well-paying jobs abroad[4]. Once recruited, these individuals are sent across borders to work under exploitative conditions.

ASEAN member states have responded to trafficking through regional cooperation frameworks. In particular, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), adopted in 2015, commits member states to strengthen cross-border coordination[9]. The visa-free policy among ASEAN countries has facilitated tourism but also created vulnerabilities for human trafficking networks. Women and children remain the most vulnerable groups, frequently targeted for sexual exploitation, forced labor, and even organ trafficking.

At the operational level, ASEANAPOL plays a crucial role in coordinating regional anti-trafficking efforts. Established in 1981 in Manila, ASEANAPOL facilitates joint operations, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building initiatives among ASEAN police forces. The organization's secretariat, based in Kuala Lumpur, is headed by a Brigadier General from one of the member states, ensuring effective communication and coordination[7].

In the past five years, Indonesia has seen a significant rise in trafficking cases, with 757 reports filed between June and August 2023 alone[1]. The Indonesian police arrested 901 suspects and rescued 2,425 victims. These operations reflect the government's commitment, backed by the Presidential Regulation No. 19/2023, which outlines the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Handling of Human Trafficking (2020–2024 [1]).

CONCLUSION

The findings confirm that human trafficking is a persistent issue in Southeast Asia, exacerbated by cross-border mobility and economic disparities. ASEANAPOL has proven instrumental in fostering cooperation among law enforcement agencies across the region. However, partial and fragmented efforts are insufficient to address the complexity of trafficking networks. Sustainable solutions require harmonized legal frameworks, continuous intelligence sharing, and multi-stakeholder engagement.

ASEANAPOL's initiatives have led to tangible successes, including the disruption of trafficking networks and the rescue of victims[10]. Nevertheless, challenges remain in maintaining long-term cooperation among ASEAN countries, especially in aligning national laws and enforcement mechanisms. As transnational crime evolves, ASEANAPOL must enhance its operational capacities to adapt to new trafficking methods and strengthen regional security.

This study highlights the vital role of ASEANAPOL in combating human trafficking and underscores the need for ongoing support from member states. A coordinated regional approach is essential to dismantle

trafficking networks and protect vulnerable populations across Southeast Asia.

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