

The US Department of State on Thursday listed Taiwan in tier 1 in its annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*

for the 11th year in a row. Taiwan's consistently high ranking in the report demonstrates that the nation's authorities take trafficking seriously and have been effective in combating it.

However, major trafficking-related arrests occur annually, meaning that preventive measures must be improved. Perhaps punishments are too lenient or perpetrators feel that the financial rewards from their actions outweigh the risks. It could also be that victims are unaware of the danger when, for example, they approach recruiters in their home country as they seek to travel for work or study.

Ringleaders of an illegal operation arrested in Taipei in November last year had allegedly forced 11 Vietnamese women into prostitution by seizing their passports and threatening them. They were charged with contraventions of the Organized Crime Prevention Act (《組織犯罪 Prevention Act》), which stipulates a minimum three-year prison term.

However, in a separate case in January last year, a suspect — whose cellphone allegedly contained explicit photographs of women he allegedly exploited — was charged with breaches of the Immigration Act (《移民法》) and the Human Trafficking Prevention Act (《人口販運 Prevention Act》), neither of which stipulate mandatory imprisonment, except in cases of organ harvesting.

There should be mandatory imprisonment in all cases of human trafficking, as it strips people of their liberty, subjecting them to physical and emotional abuse, and permanent psychological trauma.

The US report recommended that Taiwan improve systems for reporting trafficking, step up inspections and improve cooperation with victims' home countries.

In the majority of sex trade cases investigated in Taiwan, the people who have been exploited are from Vietnam or Thailand, while those caught up in forced labor and abuse at sea are largely from Indonesia, as are prospective students who are forced into labor in Taiwanese factories.

Punish traffickers, help victims

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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A major trafficking case involving 152 Vietnamese nationals who went missing in December 2018 after arriving on tourist visas was cracked the following month through cooperation with Vietnamese officials and Taiwanese diplomats in Vietnam. This demonstrates that international cooperation can be effective in tackling trafficking cases.

However, rather than cooperating on a case-by-case basis, the government should establish a permanent network of countries in the region. This is especially important given that Taiwan is not a member of Interpol. Moreover, such a network would be in the interest of all governments in the region, not just Taipei.

Along with increasing punishments, the government should close loopholes, for example by outlawing the use of migrant labor on fishing vessels — or bolstering the approval process by improving vetting of people from high-risk countries who arrive on tourist visas — and by outlawing recruitment for educational institutions through private agencies.

The government should also ensure that victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation are given support and assistance, and that they are not penalized. Foreign nationals arrested for sex work are usually deported, and Taiwanese women arrested for sex work are usually charged under the Social Order Maintenance Act (社會秩序維護法). This further victimizes them. Instead, the government should help sex workers transition through counseling, housing assistance and job training, and in the case of foreign nations, help with residency applications if desired.

Successes in combating trafficking should be applauded, but more could be done on prevention and to help those affected. If foreign nationals have suffered at the hands of Taiwanese traffickers, the government should make reparations by helping them transition into Taiwanese society, should they wish to do so.

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