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# Lao and Thai Border Officials Team Up Against Trafficking of Young Women

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Lao immigration officials will work with their Thai counterparts to prevent underage girls from entering Thailand in a bid to prevent them from being lured into the sex industry by human traffickers.

At a checkpoint at the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge which spans the two nations' Mekong River border, more than 100 Lao teenagers have been turned away this month as officials from both countries focus on unaccompanied females who appear under the age of 18. ?

The crackdown was stepped up on Feb. 4, when Thai officials began closer questioning of female teenagers unaccompanied by guardians, who tried to cross the bridge, said a Thai immigration official in Nongkhai, a city in northeastern Thailand across the river from Vientiane prefecture in Laos.

"We ask them where they are going--[but they say] they don't know where to go, they have no money," said the official. "They say they will go to Bangkok with somebody. They might possibly be at risk of becoming human trafficking victims. We are afraid that they don't know they will be lured into sex service."

On the Lao side, an immigration official in Vangtao in southwestern Laos' Champasak province told RFA's Lao Service that if the girls act suspiciously when subjected to extra questioning, Thai officials will stop them and report them to Lao officials.

"Thai officials want to know more details--how they (the Lao girls) get around in Thailand, whether they have proper documents, will they work in Thailand?" said the Lao official. "If the

girls can't answer the questions, Thai officials will deny them entry and inform Lao officials, because if they allow them to enter the country, they are afraid those girls will be at risk of becoming human-trafficking victims."

Immigration officials from both sides are focusing on Lao females who are under 18 and travel alone.

Thailand was ranked among "tier 3" countries, those "whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so," in the 2014 U.S. State Department's annual report on human trafficking. The standards are based on a U.S. law passed in 2000 called the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA).

"The majority of the trafficking victims within Thailand--tens of thousands of victims, by conservative estimates--are migrants from Thailand's neighboring countries who are forced, coerced, or defrauded into labor or exploited in the sex trade," said the report.

Laos was on the State Department's tier 2 watch list, judged to fall short of complete adherence to the TVPA, but "making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance."

#### Entry denied

Some of the Lao teenagers who try to cross the border in Thailand have identification cards saying they are older than 18, but they appear to be younger, the Thai official said.

"We have to send them back after questioning, while others can enter the kingdom [of Thailand] if there is nothing suspicious," he said.

During questioning, authorities also point out the dangers of human trafficking to make young people aware of their vulnerability to criminals, according to the Thai media.

Thai authorities told local media that they will continue the additional scrutiny of Lao girls attempting to cross the border.

#### Frequent reports

At first, Lao officials at the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge were not informed of the increased scrutiny of Lao girls by Thai border officials, said Somboun Souvannachoumklam, director of the bridge's checkpoint on the Lao side said.

Earlier this week, he said that the situation at the border crossing remained normal.

But Thai media reported that the measure at the border crossing was taken because of frequent reports about Lao girls under 18 being involved in Thailand's sex industry, some of whom were lured into the business by traffickers, while others got involved in it of their own free will.

In January, Thai authorities rescued 72 Lao teens, aged 13 to 20, who were working as prostitutes in four karaoke dens in the Song Phi Nong district of Suphanburi province in central Thailand, the Thai media reported.

According to recent figures from the Lao Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, more than 2,200 Lao victims of human trafficking have been rescued from Thai facilities and repatriated since 2001.

Between 75 percent to 80 percent were under 18 years old, and 95 percent were female.

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