

From UNIAP
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UNIAP Assists in a Case of Khmer Girls Trafficked to Thailand

This case involved eight Khmer girls from Banteay Meanchey province who were duped to believe that they would be hired to sell food and clothes in Thailand near the Thai-Cambodian border. After crossing the border, they were trafficked through Thailand to Malaysia to work in karaoke bars. Malaysian authorities later arrested them as illegal migrants, and kept them in detention for three months. Several of the girls were identified (through the intervention of H. E. Mu Sochua, then Cambodian Minister for Women's and Veteran's Affairs) as trafficking victims and repatriated back to Cambodia by IOM, but several were missed, deported to the Thai-Malaysian border, and then trafficked again within Thailand. One was later able to contact her parents in Cambodia by mobile phone, and in turn they reached out to a local non-governmental organization based in Banteay Meanchey that contacted UNIAP Cambodia. Through UNIAP's linking function, the Cambodian Minister again intervened and in February 2004 prompted a Royal Thai Police rescue of the girl, Miss Nit Sum (name changed to protect identity), from a restaurant in Golok, on the Thai-Malaysian border.

The girl was then sent to the Sri Surat Protection and Occupational Development Centre in Surat Thani Province, and later sent to Ban Kredikarn in Nonthaburi. This rescue was a clear case of successful cross-border cooperation facilitated by UNIAP. In this case, the girl remembered the mobile phone number of the trafficker in Samut Prakan, enabling Royal Thai Police to arrest Mrs. K., a Khmer citizen (residing in Thailand), who had allegedly trafficked the girls to Malaysia. However, with only one witness, concern was that the Thai courts might release the trafficker because of an insufficiently strong

case. The Cambodian Minister again asked UNIAP for assistance, and UNIAP played a linking role between the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), and the Royal Thai Police, in arranging for six victims of this trafficking ring to come from Cambodia to Thailand to present evidence against Mrs. K.

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UNIAP played a central role in bringing the Cambodian NGOs, the witnesses, and the Royal Thai Police together in a collaboration that would bring the witnesses to Bangkok for a week in order to provide evidence to the Police and also to the Thai Criminal Court against Mrs. K. UN Inter-Agency Project's bi-lingual staff (Thai-Khmer) provided interpretation services throughout the visit. The work brought together the Royal Thai Police, the Attorney General's Office, staff from MSDHS and Ban Kredikarn, a protection and occupational development center, and Thai NGOs to collaborate in an effort to ensure that the girls could travel to Thailand, recognize their perpetrator, testify in Court, be provided with adequate security, and be able to resume a normal life upon return back to Cambodia. This case has been held up as a model of cooperation between Thai and Cambodian officials, and discussed in the context

of implementation of the Thai-Cambodian Memorandum of Understanding on Trafficking.

Following their return to Banteay Meanchey, UNIAP Cambodia staff conducted a follow-up visit with representatives of the Ministry of Women's and Veteran's Affairs to assess the situation of the girls. Efforts have been made to involve representatives of the Cambodian Police, MOWVA, local and national NGOs, and the U.S. Embassy to ensure the continued safety of the girls and their families.

Some important lessons have been learned in the process of this case. It showed the critical importance of filling gaps, building networks, and creating links between organizations who have not previously worked together. It also helped highlight some of the major challenges that still remain when dealing with such cases. These include, in particular, the lack of systematized procedures for victim support and witness protection.

Other challenges include building closer cooperation between police and judicial systems from different countries, and sustaining cooperation throughout long, complicated processes involving multiple organizations and actors. As one Thai Police General said, "This case must have involved more than forty different sections, departments, and organizations in Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. If there had been one missing link, one missed phone call, it could have all fallen apart."