

Smuggling and trafficking from Vietnam to Europe

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Vietnamese migration to Europe is a complex, fluid phenomenon where a course of action that begins as smuggling can also involve trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

Vietnam is one of the top source countries for those who are smuggled and trafficked into Europe. The majority are young men and boys from a handful of central-north and northern provinces who undertake the long and dangerous journey primarily because they believe they have better economic prospects overseas. Despite steady growth in Vietnam's economy, access to opportunities for upward mobility through education or employment is unequal and mostly concentrated in urban areas. Vietnamese who lack this access and who come from provinces with a long history of seeking work overseas make up the bulk of migrants to Europe.

In the 1980s, Vietnam had labour export and study abroad programmes with former Soviet-bloc countries, which led to the establishment of diaspora communities in Moscow, Kiev, Warsaw, Prague and Berlin. These trade and migration routes still exist today, and Vietnam is now the ninth highest remittance-receiving country in the world. Services facilitating migration continued after the Cold War, but these are now operated by people-smuggling operations controlled by Vietnamese-led organised crime groups in Vietnam and overseas.

Currently, recruitment is through word of mouth and social media and messaging channels such as Facebook and Zalo. Following the tragedy in October 2019 in which 39 Vietnamese were found dead in a refrigerated lorry in Essex (in the south-east of the UK), smugglers now charge US\$50,000 or more and claim to guarantee safe passage to the UK plus employment. Families borrow at least half of the total amount to pay for the first stage from Vietnam to a European country.

If a Vietnamese person decides to borrow money and undertake the journey to Europe, they assume an enormous financial and psychological burden. Smugglers and

criminal gangs use the indebtedness as leverage to control the migrant throughout the journey, often forcing them into exploitative situations en route such as working in sweatshops or selling counterfeit drugs. Women and children in particular are vulnerable to rape and forced prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation in transit countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France.

First responders in Europe, including law enforcement officials and NGOs, face many challenges in identifying and supporting potential Vietnamese victims of trafficking. These include: insufficient Vietnamese-speaking law enforcement officials and social workers; a lack of knowledge of Vietnamese cultural context, which makes it difficult, when conducting interviews, to make accurate age assessments and reassure migrants of their safety; and a limited number of official translators who have knowledge of the trafficking and smuggling situation. First responders and authorities also often only know about activities within their own borders, and a lack of coordinated law enforcement response allows Vietnamese-led organised criminal groups to operate both under the radar and in plain sight. Finally, a lack of communication and coordination between countries and their analogous agencies prevents the tracking of migrants as they cross borders.

Building trust as first responders

In 2018, nearly 50% of all unaccompanied minors arriving at Paris-Roissy airport (part of a fairly new smuggling route transiting through Haiti) were Vietnamese nationals. The French Red Cross, acting as ad hoc administrators for unaccompanied minors detained at the French border, asked our team to provide interpretation

and social/cultural support for two young Vietnamese people, one male and one female, who had been identified as potential victims of trafficking. They had been granted temporary leave to remain in France, released into child protection services, and provided with housing while awaiting a ruling on their official status.

We arrived at the migrants' hotel very early, knowing that there was a strong possibility that they would flee. During the six hours we spent together we explained their legal situation and the advantages of staying in France, and forged as many personal connections as possible so they would begin to trust us.

There were clear indicators that the initial stories given by the young adults, Mai and Tuan,¹ were rehearsed and untrue. Mai stated that she was an orphan from Quang Tri Province – although her accent indicated otherwise – who had been kidnapped when she was 10 years old and brought to China, where she endured slave labour for several years. She claimed that one day she met a Chinese man (whose name she had never asked) who offered to pay for her journey to Europe and helped her escape. This story is one that smugglers frequently tell migrants to give to authorities when asked. In reality, criminal gangs rarely take on non-paying orphans. We had to be sensitive with Mai, however, as the reasons for giving her false story could also have been due to abuse or sexual exploitation en route.

The first step in building trust was to show empathy, offering food and drinks, and explaining that we were only volunteers who wanted to help. We discussed lighthearted topics such as their favourite Vietnamese food and football player, and joked about Mai's

nails and how important it was for every Vietnamese woman to find a good nail salon. We used the appropriate terms to address each other – 'big sister' (*chi*) and 'little sister/brother' (*em*) – and used the Vietnamese zodiac to inquire about their ages, as it is customary for Vietnamese to respond with their animal sign rather than a number.

Mai and Tuan slowly began to trust

us and eventually felt comfortable enough to reveal more of their true stories. Mai was just over 18, scared of travelling by herself, and missed her family very much. She had embarked on this journey after her father had been deported from Europe a few months earlier, and now it was her duty to repay the debts and provide for her family. Mai had no idea how much her debt was. She had taken the 'VIP' route that used air transport to reach France but would have to wait until her final destination – the UK – before the smugglers would tell her how much

she owed them. This was likely to be around €50,000, and the burden of repaying it and supporting her family were enormous weights that motivated her subsequent actions.

Tuan's father had died, leaving the family in debt. Tuan was studying law and politics at university, but his aunt and uncle encouraged him to drop out and go to the UK to earn money to support the entire family, including his mother and disabled sister. Like Mai, Tuan would not know how much his journey cost until he reached the UK. His aunt and uncle would borrow funds from elsewhere to pay the sum and Tuan would then be responsible for earning the money to repay his aunt and uncle's debt.

Less than two hours after we left the hotel, social services notified us that Mai



A mirror reflects Vietnamese migrants in 'Vietnam City', France, often the last transit point for Vietnamese migrants before they enter the UK hidden in lorries.

June 2020

www.fmreview.org/Issue64

and Tuan had jumped into a passing car that we assume was part of the smuggling network. We learned several valuable lessons from this experience. As first responders, we were unable to adequately explain and offer reassurance to Mai and Tuan of their rights to protection as vulnerable persons in Europe, especially in light of their risk of being trafficked at a later stage of their journey. We should also have asked social services to remove their mobile phones to prevent communication with the smugglers. Lastly, we needed more time to build trust with them and to speak openly and constructively about how they could repay their debt so that they would feel able to decide to stay in France.

Recommendations

European authorities and NGOs should adopt the following recommendations to improve their overall responses in identifying and protecting migrants and potential victims of trafficking or exploitation:

- collect comprehensive data about victims of trafficking across Europe
- adopt a multi-country and multi-agency approach towards Vietnamese organised crime and increase information sharing and networking between State bodies, law enforcement agencies and NGOs
- focus on the blurred lines between trafficking and smuggling to design a more effective response
- recruit and train social workers and law enforcement officials from Vietnamese diaspora communities
- provide mandatory, additional specialised training for translators, NGO representatives, social workers and law enforcement officials who are in contact with potential victims. This should include how to provide information that is specific to the Vietnamese context and how to conduct culturally sensitive interviews, and briefing on the specific control mechanisms used by traffickers and smugglers
- engage private sector actors to deploy prevention programmes in Vietnam that address economic push factors

Prevention and awareness-raising campaigns

There is a need for awareness-raising campaigns in Europe and Vietnam which depict the reality of working in Europe and make clear the increased risks of exploitation and trafficking that accompany the accumulation of considerable debt. All prevention programmes must take place prior to debt being incurred since repayment begins once money has changed hands in Vietnam, not after the migrant embarks on his or her journey. These programmes should be multi-pronged, involve multiple stakeholders and address root causes. They must combine awareness-raising activities with provision of opportunities for advancement such as scholarships to secondary or vocational schools and employment programmes.

Prevention messages must also be tailored to cultural and linguistic characteristics specific to the provinces from which the majority of migrants come. Such programmes are generally well received when they are delivered by local community leaders such as the Women's Union or by influential role models.

One example of a successful prevention programme was developed through a partnership between a Vietnam-based anti-trafficking NGO, the UK and Vietnamese governments and the private sector. The campaign used public service announcements, delivered via traditional and social media channels, featuring star players from Vietnam's national football team. Football is the most popular sport in Vietnam, and national team players are considered heroes and role models. The announcements were also used to introduce viewers to the NGO's existing vocational school scholarship and job placement programme, providing an alternate path to a better future in Vietnam.

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1. Names have been changed to protect their identities.