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Counter-trafficking efforts in South East Asia centre on raising awareness, protecting human dignity

KOTA KINABALU, MALAYSIA—Together with the Archdiocesan Human Development Committee (AHDC), ICMC continues working to curb human trafficking and debt bondage, and to better address forced labour exploitation in Malaysia. In a press conference held with members of the Malaysian media, ICMC and AHDC representatives shared how they will be intensifying efforts to raise public awareness of human trafficking, and strengthen the capacity of local organizations involved in counter-trafficking work.

“Sabah one of the major destinations for trafficking humans from Indonesia, following closely behind Peninsular Malaysia, the Middle East and Hong Kong,” noted ICMC National Programme Manager, Fatimana Agustinanto while speaking at the press conference.

“We are working closely with the Indonesian government to develop mechanisms to address human trafficking effectively, and are also working with our counterparts in Sabah to address the problems on this side of the border. To tackle this problem, cross border collaboration is a must—between both governments and NGOs.”

With human traffickers continuing to prosper through well-organised rings on both sides of the Indonesian-Malaysian border, including many job placement agencies, coordinated efforts among all stakeholders are essential. Most trafficking victims in the region are brought in to Sabah to work in the plantation, service and entertainment sectors. Some are forced to work in the domestic sector as maids, and many are given false promises that it is all free, accommodation and documents included.

In 2009, Malaysia was downgraded by the US State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (GTIP) to a “Tier 3” country with a “severe level” of human trafficking. Over the past year, Sabah’s Assistant Minister of Youth and Sports, Datuk Jahid Jahim, pointed out that Malaysia took “drastic action” to improve the nation’s image, and that “targeted efforts have also been made by the government and NGOs to reach out to high-risk communities.”

This past June, the country was again upgraded to a “Tier 2” (watch list) in the 10th Annual trafficking in persons report issued by GTIP, who provides funding to the joint AHDC-ICMC project “Curbing trafficking and debt bondage of Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah”.

The year-long project aims to curb the trafficking and debt bondage of Indonesian women and girls for commercial sexual exploitation, and create and public environment that is conducive to addressing the wider issues of forced labor exploitation.

“As part of this work, we will be carrying out a campaign against human trafficking through radio talk shows and media events, highlighting important issues for youths in Kota Marudu, Tamparuli and Keningau,” shared AHDC Director, Dominic Lim, adding that these were the areas where youth are often targeted by supposed job placement agents.

DJ Othoe, a well-known radio personality with Suria FM in Sabah, has been selected as Sabah’s Champion against Human Trafficking for the campaign carried out by AHDC and ICMC. Othoe anchors a popular radio program called “Good Morning Sabah” and is extremely popular with both Sabahan listeners and politicians. He is known to raise issues of public importance through his program, and generate public awareness towards sensitive issues and policies through public debate and question-and-answer programmes.

“Trafficking in persons cannot be tackled in one night,” recalled Agustinanto, “But this is a start, part of an effort that is on-going, and growing.”

Enticed by false promises of well-paying jobs, exploited and abused in innumerable ways and separated from their families, 2.4 million men, women and children around the world are estimated to fall victim to human trafficking each year. Through advocacy and committed collaboration with ICMC members, partners and donors, ICMC’s anti-trafficking work focuses on safe, dignified migration as a means of trafficking prevention, and contributes to strengthening victim-centered approaches within national, regional and international policies and assistance mechanisms.

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