

ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)**Press Statement on the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons 2026**

30 July 2026 – On the occasion of the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, observed under the theme “Trapped Behind the Scam”, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) reaffirms its commitment to preventing and eradicating trafficking in persons.

Human trafficking in Southeast Asia has deepened in scale and sophistication. It is no longer confined to conventional modes of exploitation. Today, technology-facilitated job scams lure victims across borders into situations of forced cyber-criminality, debt bondage, and severe physical abuse. Simultaneously, irregular migration in the region may create conditions for smuggling and trafficking networks to operate with impunity.

AICHR condemns these interconnected abuses. When safe, regular, and accessible migration pathways are obstructed or unavailable, desperate migrants are pushed into the shadows — directly into the hands of traffickers. Persons in vulnerable situations in the context of migration, in particular women and children, remain exposed to a heightened risk of trafficking and require appropriate protection and assistance, in accordance with the national laws of ASEAN Member States and their respective international obligations.

Critically, trafficking in persons is a serious crime and a serious violation of human rights and human dignity. Consistent with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), responses to trafficking should be comprehensive and balanced, encompassing prevention, criminalisation and prosecution of offenders, protection and assistance to victims and survivors, strengthened law enforcement and international cooperation. Within this framework, interventions should, as appropriate, be victim- and survivor-centred, gender-responsive, and child sensitive, ensuring the non-criminalisation of victims and survivors, and victims and survivors should not be inappropriately held liable for illicit and illegal acts they were coerced to commit as a direct result of being trafficked, in accordance with each State’s domestic laws, rules and regulations.

These approaches are reflected in, among others, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children and the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration. The recently adopted ASEAN Declaration on Promoting the Right to Development and the Right to Peace Towards Realising Inclusive and Sustainable Development provides useful guidance for regional anti-trafficking efforts. Trafficking in persons runs counter to the objectives of that Declaration: it strips individuals of their right to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from development; it fractures the community peace and stability upon which sustainable development depends; and it denies equitable access to the very essentials — education, employment, healthcare, and legal protection — that the Declaration commits ASEAN Member States to safeguard.

Peace is a precondition for development, and development is the surest guarantor of lasting peace. Trafficking exploits both their absence. Where communities lack economic opportunity, safe migration pathways, and the rule of law, traffickers fill the vacuum. Combating trafficking is therefore not a separate agenda from realising the right to development and the right to peace — it is inseparable from it. No commitment on development and peace can be considered credibly implemented while trafficking networks operate with impunity across the region.

In 2015, ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, a legally binding agreement aimed at combatting human trafficking. Since 2015, AICHR has sought to translate this commitment into practical, non-legally binding and flexible regional guidance which ASEAN Member States can implement in accordance with their respective domestic legal frameworks and international obligations. In 2023, AICHR launched the *Training Guide: Community Policing Approach to Counter Trafficking in Persons in ASEAN Member States* and the *Training Manual: Human Rights, Gender-Sensitive and Child-Friendly Approaches to Trafficking in Persons Cases for Frontline Officers*. These resources support frontline officers and law enforcement personnel in identifying and assisting victims and survivors while safeguarding their rights.

In 2025, AICHR and SOMTC further adopted the *ASEAN Guideline on the Implementation of the Non-Punishment Principle for Victims of Trafficking in Persons in ASEAN Member States*. The Guideline considers not punishing victims of trafficking in persons for unlawful acts committed by them, if such acts are directly related to the acts of trafficking, supporting ASEAN Sectoral Bodies and ASEAN Member States in their ongoing work to strengthen the application of the non-punishment principle in practice, subject to each ASEAN Member State's domestic legislation and their international and regional obligations. This principle is particularly urgent in cases of forced criminality, including persons trafficked into online scam operations, who may otherwise be misidentified, detained, prosecuted, deported, or otherwise punished instead of being recognised and protected as victims. AICHR remains committed to supporting the effective implementation of these regional resources, including through its ongoing collaboration with SOMTC to develop victim-identification indicators and training materials, as well as capacity-building and practical guidance for frontline officers and criminal justice practitioners. Screening potential victims for trafficking indicators prior to any prosecutorial or immigration action remains central to translating this principle into practice.

Within this framework, AICHR recommends the need to strengthen law enforcement, the criminal justice system and access to justice for vulnerable individuals and other persons in vulnerable situations in the context of migration. Member States are encouraged to further strengthen access to justice for these groups, including by addressing systemic and linguistic barriers through access reporting mechanisms, legal assistance, interpretation and translation services, and access to appropriate remedies, including compensation, in accordance with national laws. Member States are encouraged to strengthen bilateral labour agreements with source countries to embed migrant worker protections and monitoring mechanisms directly into the recruitment process.

AICHR recognises that no single institution can defeat trafficking alone. Cohesive, integrated action is required across all ASEAN bodies on law enforcement, labour, immigration, and social welfare, in cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector, and the international community, to ensure a holistic regional response. The engagement of relevant stakeholders, including CSOs, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders, can contribute to victim assistance, awareness-raising and capacity-building, where appropriate and in accordance with national laws and regulations.

As the world marks the 2026 World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, AICHR looks forward to enhanced action in combatting the scourge of trafficking to fully realise the aspirations of *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*.