Introduction

Human trafficking is an egregious crime and a violation of human rights. It is extremely complex and defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."1 Exploitation shall include, at the minimum, the exploitation of others, the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. Globally, an estimated 21 million people are currently held in conditions of forced labour. Asia alone accounts for over 50%. Most trafficked persons detected within South Asia and East Asia are either domestically trafficked or trafficked within the same sub-region.1ii

The past decade saw some achievements and challenges. At the global level, the number of the countries criminalizing most forms of trafficking as set out in the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol increased from 33 countries in 2003 to 158 in 2016.iii The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in September 2015 include goals and targets on trafficking in persons,iv calling for stopping trafficking and violence against children, taking measures against human trafficking, and eliminating all forms of violence against and exploitation of women and girls. The UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants on 19 September 2016 was a historic opportunity to come up with a blueprint for a better international response specifically to human trafficking. The Summit was a watershed moment to strengthen the governance of international migration, creating a more responsible, predictable system for responding to large movements of refugees and migrants. Of the nineteen commitments that apply to both refugees and migrants in the New York Declarationv adopted by 193 Members, three are dedicated to specify concrete actions against the crimes of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. At the sub-regional levels in Asia-Pacific, human trafficking has been collectively addressed in three major platforms: the Plan of Action on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children of the Association by South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking (COMMIT).

However, many challenges remain. Enforcement of laws and policies remains weak. Laws which touch upon social issues are least enforced. Where laws have criminalized trafficking, very few prosecutions have been followed through. Policy frameworks are often unknown to a greater segment of the population. Effective implementation of laws and policies has also been hampered by lack of adequate financial, human and material resources. The role of parliamentarians is critically important in overcoming such challenges.

Against this backdrop, the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD), a network of 29 national committees of parliamentarians from Asia-Pacific countries, has collaborated with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Government of Australia to achieve the common goal of supporting and promoting gender equality and women's
empowerment. Regionally, the partnership to date has engaged Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians and strengthened their collective and individual capacities to exercise their responsibility as powerful public leaders to promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence. AFPPD most recently commissioned research on child marriage and human trafficking. Two evidence-based publications have been produced and widely disseminated at global, regional and sub-regional parliamentarians' meetings: "Parliamentary Good Practices for Effective Implementation of Laws and Policies for Prevention of Child Marriage," and "Parliamentary Good Practices for Effective Implementation of Laws and Policies for Prevention of Trafficking."

Further, to bolster parliamentarians' knowledge and understanding on issues of child marriage, trafficking, violence against women and girls, and its linkages to sustainable development, AFPPD signed a memorandum of understanding with South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC). SAIEVAC is an apex body of SAARC that works towards ending trafficking and violence against children and women in South Asia in furthering the vision and mission of SAARC.

Building on these partnerships, AFPPD and SAIEVAC are co-organizing a regional conference on combating human trafficking, under the auspices of DFAT of the Government of Australia. The conference will provide an additional platform for AFPPD and its partners to influence parliamentarians on human trafficking. Rolling out the "Parliamentary Good Practices for Effective Implementation of Laws and Policies for Prevention of Trafficking," the conference will revisit the root causes of human trafficking, share some lessons of positive developments, comprehend the challenges of preventing trafficking, and develop regional and national action plans.

As countries adopt their own national plans to implement their priorities within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), AFPPD and SAIEVAC will be working closely with our champion parliamentarians and other key stakeholders, intergovernmental bodies, governments and NGOs, in advocating to reinforce political will for prioritizing legislation and effectively implementing laws and policies against trafficking at national and regional levels. As the world gathers in 2017 at the UN General Assembly, the participants of this Regional Parliamentarians’ Conference on Combating Human Trafficking are expected to reinforce their anti-trafficking programmes and commitments, sharing their progress for the essential evaluation of the Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons. In preparation for global actions against trafficking, the Regional Parliamentarians’ Conference will provide an ideal platform, raising awareness on human trafficking, increasing knowledge sharing of good practices, and reinforcing their commitments on human trafficking for regional and national actions.

Objectives:

1. Strengthen regional platforms to improve advocacy, coordinate and share best practices and information.
2. Discuss how to use parliamentarians' oversight and budgetary powers to address trafficking and to monitor and facilitate effective implementation of related laws and policies;
3. Strengthen parliamentarians' capacity in overseeing implementation of legislation and policies against trafficking in South and South East Asia and discuss steps to improve parliamentary mechanisms to secure effective enforcement;
4. Develop common strategies/sub-regional action plans for parliamentary and cross-sectoral cooperation to prevent trafficking and promote south-south cooperation.

Expected results

1. Increased knowledge sharing and understanding by parliamentarians on good practices and parliamentary strategies for effective implementation of laws and policies in combatting human trafficking.
2. Increased awareness and accelerated efforts to combat human trafficking among parliamentarians in sub-regions.
3. Reinforced commitments to combat human trafficking by high-level decision makers including from SAARC and ASEAN.
4. Sub-regional action plans to be developed for parliamentary cooperation to combat human trafficking. One or two key areas for each participating country to be identified and work plans formulated to promote and strengthen national level advocacy against human trafficking.

Date and venue: 21-22 March 2017, Bangkok, Thailand

Target audience and participants

Sixty (60 participants comprising parliamentarians from selected countries mainly from South and South East Asia, civil society organizations, and regional partners)

- 35 AFPPD select parliamentarians nominated by National Committees, as well as Standing Committee Members on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment and on Investing in Youth
- 10 members of SAIEVAC network.
- 10 representatives from organizations spearheading advocacy and policy debates on combatting human trafficking.
- 5 secretariat staff of AFPPD and SAIEVAC

Format

The conference will consist of resource persons' presentations, interactive panel discussions, and open discussions. Participants will be encouraged to share experiences and good practices to promote South-South collaboration.

Co-organizers

- Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development
- South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children
Endnotes:


ii UNODC Global Trafficking In Persons Report, 2016

iii Bangladesh, Bhutan Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan have not ratified the “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” Philippines, India and Cambodia have ratified the Protocol; Indonesia, Lao, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam have ratified the protocol with reservations.

iv Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
*Target 5.2 “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.”

Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
*Target 8.5 says “By 2030 achieve a full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men.”
*Target 8.7: “Take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, eradicate forced labour, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers.”
*Target 8.8: “Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers including migrant workers, in particular women migrants and those in precarious employment.”
*Target 8.7 calls for nations to, “Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.”

Goal 10: To reduce inequality within and among countries
*Target 10.7 “Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.”

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
*Target 16.2 “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.”

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
*Target 17.18 “By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.”