

I. Background Information

Forced labor represents one of the most severe violations of human rights in the modern global economy. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), forced labor is defined as work or service exacted from any person under the threat of penalty and for which the person has not offered themselves voluntarily. This practice is frequently linked to human trafficking, debt bondage, and other forms of coercion, and remains widespread despite international efforts to eradicate it.

South-East Asia plays a central role in global production networks, supplying goods to international markets in sectors such as textiles and garments, agriculture, electronics manufacturing, construction, mining, and fishing. The region's rapid industrialization, combined with high demand for low-cost labor, has contributed to the expansion of complex and fragmented supply chains. These structures often rely on subcontractors and informal labor, making oversight difficult and enabling abusive labor practices to remain concealed.

Migrant workers are among the most vulnerable groups affected by forced labor in the region. Many migrate internally or across borders in search of employment and are recruited through labor brokers who frequently charge excessive recruitment fees. This often results in debt bondage, whereby workers are unable to leave their employment until debts are repaid. Other coercive practices may include confiscation of identity documents, withholding of wages, restriction of movement, and threats of deportation or violence.

Weak enforcement of labor laws, limited inspection capacity, corruption, and lack of access to legal remedies further contribute to the persistence of forced labor. While many multinational corporations have adopted voluntary codes of conduct and ethical sourcing policies, enforcement remains inconsistent. Global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have worsened these conditions by increasing unemployment, reducing monitoring mechanisms, and pushing workers into more precarious forms of employment.

II. United Nations Involvement

The United Nations has developed an extensive framework to combat forced labour, human trafficking, and exploitation in global supply chains, and these mechanisms play a crucial role in addressing the situation in South-East Asia. Central to the UN's efforts are the International Labour Organization's Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) of 1930 and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105) of 1957. These conventions, both widely ratified across the region, commit states to eliminating all forms of forced or compulsory labour and prohibit its use for political coercion, discrimination, or punishment. They form the legal foundation upon which the UN and its specialized agencies build their programmes and recommendations.

The broader strategic direction for UN action is guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all Member States in 2015. Within this agenda, Sustainable Development Goal 8 promotes inclusive economic growth and decent work for all, while Target 8.7 specifically calls for the eradication of forced labour, the end of modern slavery and human trafficking, and the elimination of child labour in all forms by 2025. To accelerate progress toward this target, the UN supports Alliance 8.7, a global partnership that brings together governments, UN agencies, civil society, and the private sector. Through this initiative, countries in South-East Asia receive technical assistance, research support, and coordinated guidance to strengthen labour inspections, improve recruitment systems, and address exploitation in high-risk sectors such as fishing, manufacturing, and agriculture.

In addition to labour-focused conventions, the UN promotes corporate accountability through the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, endorsed by the Human Rights Council in 2011. These principles outline the responsibility of states to protect human rights, the obligation of businesses to respect them, and the need to ensure access to remedy for victims. They require companies to conduct human rights due diligence to identify, prevent, and address forced labour risks in their supply chains — a critical issue in a region where complex subcontracting networks often obscure exploitative practices.

The UN's legal framework is further reinforced by the Palermo Protocol, the primary international treaty addressing human trafficking. The Protocol obliges states to criminalize trafficking, protect victims, and strengthen cross-border cooperation, all of which are essential in South-East Asia, where trafficking networks frequently operate across national borders. UN agencies such as the ILO, UNODC, and OHCHR work closely with governments to implement these obligations, support victim assistance programmes, and improve regional coordination. Through these combined conventions, principles, and initiatives, the United Nations seeks to address both the root causes and the systemic structures that allow forced labour to persist in South-East Asian supply chains.

III. Bloc Positions

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) serves as the primary regional body addressing labour issues in South-East Asia. While ASEAN recognizes the need to combat forced labour and human trafficking, its principle of non-interference limits stronger regional enforcement. Member states vary widely in their capacity to regulate labour conditions, and ASEAN's efforts therefore focus on cooperation, information-sharing, and gradual improvements rather than binding obligations.

Labour-receiving countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore rely heavily on migrant workers to sustain key industries. These states are aware that forced-labour allegations can damage their international reputation and affect trade, and they have supported UN initiatives aimed at improving labour inspections and recruitment practices. However, economic dependence on low-cost labour often slows the pace of reform. Labour-sending countries, including Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh, and Nepal, prioritize the protection of their citizens abroad but face challenges such as weak governance, limited oversight of recruitment agencies, and reliance on remittances.

Western importing countries, including members of the European Union, the United States, Canada, and Australia, generally adopt a more assertive stance. These states increasingly link market access to compliance with international labour standards and support UN frameworks promoting transparency and accountability in global supply chains. Civil society organizations and international NGOs also play an important role, advocating for stronger protections for migrant workers and greater corporate responsibility across the region.

IV. Questions to Consider

- What is my country's official position regarding forced labour and human trafficking in supply chains?
- Does my country have economic, political, or labour-migration ties to South-East Asian states? If yes, what are they?
- Are there UN conventions, protocols, or initiatives related to forced labour that my country has supported, ratified, or opposed?
- What responsibility should states bear for forced labor occurring within supply chains operating on their territory?
- How can forced labor be addressed without undermining economic development and employment in producing countries?

V. Useful Sources

Basic Information

<https://www.ilo.org/> International Labour Organization

<https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/forced-labour-modern-slavery-and-trafficking-persons>

https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2025/May/human-trafficking-for-forced-labour-in-supply-chains_-what-you-need-to-know.html

UN Involvement

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/forced-labour-convention-1930-no-29> Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/abolition-forced-labour-convention-1957-no-105> Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/protocol.html#:~:text=UN%20Convention%20against%20Transnational%20Organized,Source:%20treaties.un.org> The Palermo Protocol (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children)

Regional Context

<https://asean.org/>