

India: Human Trafficking in the North East

KOKRAJHAR, 16 May 2006 (PLUSNEWS): Images of guns, drugs and rebels have long defined India's troubled northeast. Now, a study across eight states in this resource-rich, infrastructure-poor, conflict-scarred region seeks to highlight a new worry: the rising tide of human trafficking - mostly women and girls - and its potential for hastening the spread of HIV/AIDS.

India's northeast is home to 200 of the 430 odd tribal groups in the country. The region is also socially and culturally distinct from mainstream India. Along with Kerala, this pocket is the bastion of Christianity in the country.

The seven-month long study carried out by the Nedan Foundation, an Indian NGO working in the largely isolated region, was sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is expected to be released soon.

"Poverty and conflict are fuelling trafficking in the north eastern states. This opens up huge possibilities for the spread of HIV. It is high time programmes address the problems," Digambar Narzary, head of the Nedan Foundation, said.

"We visited 25 relief camps of internally displaced persons [IDPs] in Kokrajhar in Bodoland Territorial Council, Assam [state]. Nearly 200,000 people are living in these camps without proper food. Traffickers carry out recruitment drives in such relief camps. They make false promises of jobs as domestic help in big cities," he said.

An influx of migrants over the past few decades into northeast India from neighbouring areas has sparked ethnic conflicts over land, leading to demands for secession and political autonomy.

Many armed insurgent groups are active in the region and blood feuds are common. In the last few decades, violence has ravaged the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Assam, Manipur and Tripura have also witnessed massive displacement. Economic liberalisation launched in the early 1990s is yet to impact on the northeast in the same way that it has touched other parts of India.

Narzary noted that more than 100 young women had gone missing from the camps over the past two years. Regional analysts fear that such "missing girls" may have been sold into sexual slavery or "temporarily married" – often a euphemism for prostitution.

The fear is that many such girls are extremely susceptible to HIV/AIDS and that many have already been infected. "Young girls and women from poor, desperate families are dually vulnerable: to being trafficked into the sex trade and to catching HIV. But there are no initiatives at present to address these twin problems," Nazary said.

India now holds the second largest absolute number of HIV infections in the world, UNAIDS has said. With more than 5 million people living with HIV in the adult population in 2004, India accounts for almost 13 percent of global HIV prevalence.

Kokrajhar is one of several hot spots in conflict-ridden northeast India. Since the late 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced in the region by regular clashes between various militant and tribal groups.

Estimates of IDPs in northeast India due to prolonged insurgency remain scarce. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) said up to 200,000 people were displaced in 2003 in Assam state alone

and a further 15,000 in neighbouring Tripur state.

But with little reliable research, the trafficking problem is more widespread in the region than previously thought. Interviews by Nedan's field teams with 60 teenage sex workers at Dimapur, a border town in the north eastern state of Nagaland, revealed that many of the girls had been trafficked from the Naga countryside with false promises of sales jobs in big cities.

Most of the girls were from broken families, having lost one or both parents in the region's protracted ethnic conflicts. Almost all had dropped out of school and faced a bleak future, the foundation discovered.

Sexual transmission is driving India's AIDS epidemic, according to UNAIDS. This route accounts for approximately 86 percent of HIV infections in the world's second most populous country. The remaining 14 percent are through blood transfusion, mother-to-child-transmission and injecting drug use, particularly in north eastern states and some metropolitan cities.

Narzary hopes that the report's key findings, such as these from the eight states, will spur the Indian government, as well as NGOs, to come forward with initiatives to reduce the level of human trafficking in the region and thereby lessen the spread of HIV/AIDS in this troubled part of the country.