



'Criminalised, detained, deported': UK accused of failing trafficked children

Lawyers and child protection groups warn Britain routinely returns trafficked children to Vietnam despite risk of further exploitation

Modern-day slavery in focus is supported by



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Child trafficking victims deported back to [Vietnam](#) by the British government face the risk of being re trafficked and further exploited, lawyers and child protection groups have warned.

The case of Stephen*, a former child victim of modern slavery, has become a focal point for concern. Stephen was trafficked into the UK aged 10 to work in a cannabis factory, where he was locked up, beaten and forced to take drugs.

His appeal against a refused asylum application has attracted support from hundreds of thousands of people.

However, lawyers are warning that people like Stephen, now 19, are being routinely deported back to Vietnam without any support.

“We have worked on dozens of cases where, without our intervention, child trafficking victims would have been deported back to Vietnam, a country where many of our clients haven’t lived for years and haven’t any support or family to return to,” said Ahmed Aydeed, of law firm Duncan Lewis.

“We know from working with many clients who have been trafficked into cannabis farms or nail bars or brothels here in the UK that there is an enhanced risk of re trafficking when they arrive back in Vietnam.”

Child trafficking referrals in the UK hit a record high in 2017, increasing to 1,461 in the first three-quarters of the year, compared with 1,278 for the whole of 2016, according to the [latest figures from the National Crime Agency](#).

The rise has prompted concern among lawyers and campaigners that the Modern [Slavery Act](#), which prime minister Theresa May introduced as home secretary to help end slavery and support victims, is failing to protect some of Britain's most vulnerable children.

The government does not record data on the number of trafficked children granted or refused asylum, nor does it hold information on how many are deported when they reach the age of 18.

“The situation facing young Vietnamese child trafficking victims is really bad now,” said Aydeed. “We supposedly have good legislation and guidance on how to protect victims, but we’re still seeing child trafficking victims routinely criminalised, detained and deported.”

Aydeed said that police, focused on prosecution targets, often fail to pick up indicators. In some cases, he said, the Home Office has proceeded with deportation attempts even after positively identifying a victim of trafficking.

Aydeed added that children are often deported by the Home Office before confirmation of whether or not a child is a victim of trafficking has been obtained.

Mark Shepherd, lawyer and director of Migrant Legal Project, said the Home Office regards the Vietnamese government as a “safe pair of hands”.

3,000 children
enslaved in Britain
after being
trafficked from
Vietnam

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Shepherd cited the case of another Vietnamese boy who, having helped police identify his traffickers, is under special protection from his local authority because of the risk of re-trafficking, yet has likewise been forced to appeal against an asylum refusal. “He’s an orphan with no family, who the local authority consider to be at risk of being re-trafficked. He has PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] because of his

experiences but it is still considered safe to return him to Vietnam ... What profile do you have to have for them to say it is not safe for them to return?”

Chloe Setter, head of advocacy at Every Child Protected Against Trafficking, a child protection organisation, said that the system fails to monitor long-term outcomes, such as re-trafficking of adults or children.

“Why are we referring children into a system like the national referral mechanism that recognises them as trafficking victims but doesn’t do anything for them? We are saying if a child is recognised as a victim of trafficking they should get a level of specialist support.”

In 2011, the UN’s International Organisation for Migration warned that trafficking victims returned to Vietnam faced risks including continued threats or dangers from their traffickers.

Mimi Vu, director of advocacy at Pacific Links, a Vietnamese anti-trafficking charity, said: “Because of a lack of resources there are no specialised long-term support services for male victims of trafficking returned to Vietnam. These all create the conditions for re-trafficking because the factors that led [victims] to be trafficked in the first place still exist and are even enhanced by what [they’ve] gone through.”

A Home Office spokesperson said: “In 2015, the government introduced a world-leading Modern Slavery Act to give law enforcement agencies the tools to tackle this sickening crime and it remains a top priority for this government.

“In October 2017 the government announced that the UK would spend at least £3m of the modern slavery fund in Vietnam. This money will help to catch offenders, support victims and stop people falling into slavery in the first place.”

**Name changed to protect identity*
