

WASHINGTON : Thailand remained high on the list of nations where there is human trafficking as the US lowered the alert on the Philippines, Singapore and Laos.

The US State Department said that "Tier 2 Watch List" nations named in the annual report, including Thailand, have been big on promises to fight human trafficking but have failed to show improvement over the past year.

Along with Thailand, there were numerous Tier 2 countries, from Afghanistan and Argentina to Vietnam and Zambia. It includes Indonesia, Cambodia, China, Russia,

Burma is a Tier 3 nation as always, among the very worst of human traffickers, as is North Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The report, signed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, stated that, "Thailand is a source, destination, and transit country for men, women, and children...

"The majority of the trafficking victims identified within Thailand are migrants from Thailand's neighboring countries who are forced, coerced, or defrauded into labor or commercial sexual exploitation."

The report directly criticised and then praised the government, saying it "does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so."

Despite the strong 2008 law against trafficking, the US report said there are too few prosecutions and efforts to identify victims of trafficking, particularly among illegal migrants from neighbouring countries. It condemned corruption, which it claimed is widespread among police.

The State Department also issued a "fact sheet" focussing on the Thai fishing fleet, which it said was using "modern slavery" of undocumented Burmese and Cambodians, either forced or deceived into working for months at a time, and without a break.

"Slavery at sea... remains prevalent," the report said.

The annual Trafficking in Persons Report has become increasingly sensitive for Southeast Asian governments, which face a cutoff of US assistance if they are found to be unresponsive in fighting trafficking.

The latest report elevated the Philippines, Singapore and Laos off the watchlist to so-called Tier 2, which means that the countries do not fully meet standards on human trafficking but are making efforts to do so.

Releasing the report, the State Department said that millions of people around the world remained trapped in modern-day slavery for sexual exploitation or labor and called on governments around the world to take action.

The report "embodies the United States' continued dedication to fighting traffickers no matter where they may be, because fighting slavery and standing up for human rights is part of our national identity," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in a forward to the report.

But US allies have sometimes responded indignantly. Singapore last year lashed out at being put on the watchlist and urged the United States -- which again this year listed itself as Tier 1 -- to examine its own record, including the treatment of its millions of illegal residents.

In the Philippines, President Benigno Aquino took the unusual step of announcing in April that his country was off the watchlist, leading US officials to clarify that no decision had yet been made.

In the report, issued early Tuesday Thailand time, the State Department praised an "intensified effort" by the Philippines. It said the Philippines convicted 25 trafficking offenders, compared with nine the previous year, including first-ever convictions for forced labor.

Elsewhere in Asia, the State Department removed Sri Lanka and Fiji from its watchlist. It praised Sri Lanka -- often on the receiving end of criticism over human rights -- for its first convictions under an anti-trafficking law on the island, which is a major source of workers to abuse-prone Arab countries.

On the other hand, the United States downgraded the Federated States of Micronesia to Tier 3, meaning that some assistance will be suspended to the nation of more than 600 islands that is closely linked to the United States.

The report said that Micronesian traffickers have forced women into prostitution in the United States with promises of well-paying jobs.

The State Department said that Micronesian waters are seen as easy for traffickers but that no figures are available as the government has not conducted any investigations into the problem.

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