



Thai police rescued six Burmese children, one as young as four years of age, from a trafficking gang in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, on Tuesday morning. Three Burmese have been arrested—two women and a man—under suspicion of human trafficking, sex offences, and forcing the children to work as beggars.

Lt Col. Hsaiphim Tijarat from Mae Ping Police Station in Chiang Mai said that his officers are still investigating the case, but three suspects—Tin Ngwe (57), Shwe Kyi (54) and Ma Cho (47)—are currently being questioned.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy on Wednesday, Hsaiphim said, “Among the suspects, Tin Ngwe is accused of three crimes: human trafficking, forcing the children into begging and sexual molestation. When we finish questioning the suspects, their cases will be sent to the court.”

Interviewed by The Irrawaddy at the police station, Tin Ngwe said he was originally from Pegu Division and had migrated to Thailand in April 2010 with hopes of earning a better income. He said that he had previously worked as a trash collector in Shan State before moving to Thailand with his wife, Shwe Kyi, who was also arrested on Tuesday.

“When I woke up on Tuesday morning, about 30 people had broke in to our house and surrounded us. The police officers said that we were being arrested for human trafficking and for forcing the children to beg on the street,” he said. “I was accused of sexually molesting one of the girls.

“But the girl who has complained that I molested her is my granddaughter. She is the daughter of my own daughter. How can anyone think that I would be so stupid as to abuse my own granddaughter?” he said, adding that all the children are his relatives, and that he has been taking care of them in Chiang Mai.

The girl in question was named as Wai Mon Oo, 18, who has told police that she used to share a house in the Nong Hoi district of Chiang Mai with Tin Ngwe and Shwe Kyi. She reported that she fled two months ago before she filed a complaint with the authorities.

The other children involved are reportedly aged four, six, seven, 16 and 22, the latter perhaps having the mentality of a child.

The six rescued in the raid are currently being housed at the Chiang Mai Shelter for Children and Families where medical staff are checking their blood types and DNA, according to Ms. Mingkwan Weerachart, the head of the shelter.

“When we talked with the children from Tuesday's raid, we found that they were forced to take a drug that made them dazed,” she told The Irrawaddy on Wednesday. “We believe the suspects intoxicated the children because their dazed appearance could be used to cause people to feel pity for them. When the case is over, we will send the children back to their own country.”

She said that the trafficking of children has recently become common, and that children from other countries, notably Laos, have also become victims of human trafficking gangs.

But suspect Ma Cho told The Irrawaddy that the children were not victims of human trafficking.

“We beg because we are so poor,” she said, tearfully. “We don't have jobs and have no income. If we were really involved in human trafficking as the police say, we wouldn't need to beg anymore.”

Ma Cho said her own personal daily income from begging is 200 to 500 baht [US \$6.70—\$16.70]. She said she usually begs at the Night Bazaar area in central Chiang Mai, a popular shopping area for tourists.

In June, 15 Burmese children who were suspected of being victims of human trafficking were apprehended at a police checkpoint in Chiang Mai Province. However, Thai authorities concluded they were illegal migrants, but not victims of trafficking, and they were consequently deported.

Washington-based HumanTrafficking.Org says that the mismanagement of the country's economy and a lack of job opportunities are the main reasons for Burma's significant trafficking problem.

Christian relief agency World Vision, which is active in Thailand, says on their website that Burmese people are trafficked to other Asian countries, such as China, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Korea and Macao, but that the primary destination is Thailand.

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