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For the attention of:

Republic Public Prosecutor's Office;

Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Zrenjanin;

Office for Coordination of Anti-Trafficking Activities
Police Directorate - Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia;

PD Zrenjanin;

Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
Sector for Social Protection
Centre for Human Trafficking Victims' Protection;

Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
Labour Inspectorate;

Labour Inspectorate in Zrenjanin;

Ministry of Health;

Department Zrenjanin - Sanitary Inspection of AP Vojvodina;

Protector of Citizens.

A report of potential trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation and an appeal for a response of the competent authorities

Dear Colleagues,

We are addressing you with reference to the suspicion that the criminal offense of trafficking in human beings has been committed for the purpose of labour exploitation of a large number of persons, citizens of Vietnam, hired to work in Serbia by the Chinese company China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction, on the construction of the car tire factory Linglong International Europe doo in Zrenjanin.

ASTRA – Anti-Trafficking Action, a journalist of VICE Zrenjanin and the Initiative for Economic and Social Rights - A11, together with an interpreter, organized a site visit to workers from Vietnam, approximately 50 of them, on November 14, 2021 in Zrenjanin. On that occasion, we received information that indicated that this was a possible trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation. Attached is a report on the situation on the date at the site.

Recruitment of workers and organization of transport

Workers were recruited through several Vietnamese agencies ("Songhg gia Lai" and "Cog ly bao son") to work for China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction, a tire factory in Zrenjanin. Some workers found the job offer on the Internet, and some of them through acquaintances. The job advertisement

referred to jobs in production of aircraft parts in Serbia, with a specified salary of 775 EUR and more acceptable living and working conditions, compared to those in Vietnam.

Workers from Vietnam, 500 of them who are currently in Zrenjanin, came to Serbia in March, April and May. The transport was organized by agencies from Vietnam, which demanded an advance payment of USD 2200 to USD 4000 for their services (transportation, obtaining visas and accommodation). The workers obtained the demanded amounts by borrowing money and paid the advance to the agency.

Working and living conditions

Some of the workers say that they had signed a contract with China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction Co. Ltd, branch Belgrade before, and some that they did it upon arrival in Serbia. None of the workers who signed the contract have been given a start date, and the payments were in cash.

They work in shifts, which last 9 hours, with one-hour long lunch break. The employer did not provide the use of all means and equipment for personal protection at work, and they deducted the costs of part of the work equipment (boots, gloves, work clothes) from the salary. Every 10 days, workers receive work gloves, and if they are damaged earlier, the workers must cover the costs of obtaining new ones themselves.

The workers are required to work 26 days a month, and if for any reason they do not fulfil this, and have at least a day less, they are not paid for that month. Also, if they do not arrive on time, they are fined by being denied a daily payment.

Upon their arrival and accommodation, the workers had to hand over their passports to the employer because they were told that this was the practice with foreign nationals. Until the moment of the visit, their passports were not returned to them. Although some of them were convinced that they had a residence permit and a work permit, no one could confirm this information with certainty, nor they were given paper permits.

When they came to Serbia, approximately 500 of them were accommodated in barracks that did not have adequate living conditions. In the overcrowded rooms there are bunk beds, and in the building, there are only two toilets for the mentioned number of workers.

There is no adequate infrastructure and sewage, so faeces are spilled ten meters from the barracks, which is extremely health hazardous. In addition, they are not provided with heating, electricity and enough drinking water, they do not have a washing machine and other household appliances, but they wash their clothes by hand, with cold water and dry them on some ropes where they store other things as well, because they do not have closets.

The workers wanted to get vaccinated against COVID-19, but when they contacted the company's officials, they were told that it was a complicated procedure and that they could not. Several of them, with symptoms of COVID-19 infection, had to cover the costs of testing in a private clinic where they were referred by their employer, as well as the costs of necessary medicines prescribed by the doctor. In addition to being infected with Covid during work, one worker injured his neck, and another his finger, but they also did not receive adequate health care, but were forced to treat themselves. When someone falls ill, he isolates himself in an improvised hospital room where he stays until he recovers, without compensation. The workers do not have clothes for colder weather, and all those we spoke to were wearing light clothes and slippers.

As living and working conditions were below any minimum, the workers were forced to strike twice, the first time because they had no food, so the company provided them with a gas bottle, stove and groceries (rice,

potatoes and cabbage), and the second time due to unpaid salaries, because their salary was two months late. But even though the employer had paid them the salary for one month then, the practice of irregular payments continued. Due to lack of food, workers were forced to hunt rabbits, dogs and cats to feed themselves. We emphasise the issue of worker safety, considering that a strong smell of gas could be felt at the place where the workers were located.

The workers testify that half of them would like to return home to Vietnam, but they cannot because they do not have their passports, nor have they been paid all the agreed salaries. Some are afraid of deportation, and most of all that their money will not be paid, and that they will not be able to settle the debts they made in order to start working in Serbia.

Preliminary indicators of human trafficking

The following indicators of human trafficking can be drawn from the above testimonies:

- recruitment and deception related to working and living conditions, promise of legal work and a decent salary,
- complex and completely unregulated system of referral of foreign workers, many different actors, agencies and private companies,
- workers do not speak or understand the local language,
- workers are not in possession of their personal documents,
- restriction of communication and movement,
- group housing in extremely unsanitary barracks, inadequate nutrition,
- questionable contract and manner of engagement,
- labour exploitation (234 working hours per month),
- irregular and inadequate monetary compensation,
- financial penalty,
- high dependence on the employer,
- unsafe working and living conditions,
- threats and intimidation by the employer,
- inability to stop working and return home.

According to the information received, the Chinese company Linglong International Europe d.o.o. Zrenjanin, for its construction site of a car tire factory, hired the contractor China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction, which recruits workers to work in Serbia through a dozen agencies from Vietnam.

Linglong International Europe d.o.o. Zrenjanin was registered with the Serbian Business Registers Agency on November 19, 2018, under registration number 21433896, at the address Avenija Linglong 1, 23000 Zrenjanin, and China Energy Engineering Group Tianjin Electric Power Construction was registered with SBRA on September 19, 2018, under registration number 29507953, at the address Masarikov Trg 8a, 11080 Zemun.

We note that in addition to the citizens of Vietnam, workers, citizens of the Republic of China, have been hired to work on the Linglong construction site, and that there is a possibility of their exploitation as well.

In this case, all three constituent elements of the crime of trafficking in human beings are present:

- the victims were lured, i.e. recruited, deceived, referred, transported, accepted (action),
- the victims were deceived, their freedom was restricted - they could not move and travel freely, their position of vulnerability was abused, i.e. abuse of authority and power of the employer (means),



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- money is earned through abuse by agencies and forced labour by the employer (intention to exploit and labour exploitation).

Therefore, we ask you to, urgently and in accordance with your authority, take further steps in order to identify and protect suspected victims of trafficking, as well as take appropriate measures to prevent and punish the exploitative practices of competent companies and responsible persons.

We thank you in advance for timely response and cooperation, and we are at your disposal for any additional questions on ASTRA SOS line 011 / 785-0000, as well as email sos@astra.rs .

Respectfully,

In Belgrade, November 15, 2021