Govt moves to repatriate 500 Ugandans stuck in Cambodia

Some of the stranded Ugandans have reportedly spent more than a year there and have accumulated heavy penalties for illegal stay.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

The government has unveiled plans to repatriate up to 500 Ugandans stranded in Cambodia after falling victim to human trafficking syndicates that lure job seekers abroad with false employment promises.

The Ugandans are part of a wider group of migrants from Africa and Asia who were trafficked to Southeast Asia and forced to work in illegal online scamming compounds. Many were abandoned after authorities in Cambodia raided and shut down the facilities.

In an interview with the Daily Monitor, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr Henry Oryem Okello, said the affected Ugandans ignored repeated government warnings against travelling to countries where Uganda has no bilateral labour agreements.

"That is a group of Ugandans whom I have continuously warned. We rescued about 24 Ugandans a few months last year. We want Ugandans not to go to that region again; otherwise, they will be involved in a war which is not theirs. But these Ugandans don't listen," Mr Oryem said.

"I'm aware that the group has gone there. We are again trying, through our embassy in Malaysia, to get them released from where they have been abducted. But again, I warn Ugandans: please stop going abroad to work unless we have a bilateral agreement with those countries," he added.

The minister cautioned that without formal labour arrangements, government intervention becomes extremely difficult once Ugandans encounter problems abroad.

"Otherwise, if you get into trouble, the Ugandan government may not be able to assist you. And even if assistance is offered, it will be very difficult to get you out of those situations," he said.

Government officials say the exact number of Ugandans stranded in Cambodia remains uncertain, with figures fluctuating as more victims come forward. Initial reports indicated about 21 victims, later rising to more than 200, and now estimated at about 500.

"I cannot give you a definite figure because there are different groups in different countries. Some went through Thailand, others through Malaysia, so the numbers keep changing," Mr Oryem said.

Trafficking networks

The deputy national coordinator for the prevention of trafficking in persons at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Mr Derrick Kigenya Basalirwa, said most of the Ugandans were recruited by organised criminal networks that advertise fake jobs online.

"Most of them were promised jobs but ended up in scamming compounds in Cambodia," Mr Kiyenga said, adding that victims were forced to take part in cyber fraud schemes targeting unsuspecting people across the world.



Henry Oryem Okello, State Minister for Foreign Affairs

He said the situation worsened after Cambodian authorities raided and closed several scamming centres, leaving thousands of foreign workers stranded without legal documentation.

"When these scamming compounds are rounded off, the victims are left on their own. Their travel documents are usually confiscated by the traffickers, so they cannot move freely or find their way to the airport," Mr Kiyenga said.

Some of the stranded Ugandans have reportedly spent more than a year in Cambodia and have accumulated heavy penalties for illegal stay after losing their jobs and visas.

BACKGROUND

Uganda has no bilateral labour externalisation agreement with Cambodia, making all Ugandans working there illegal migrants under Cambodian law. Data from the Directorate of Public Prosecutions shows a steady rise in trafficking cases. Between July 2023 and 2024, a total of 3,259 trafficking cases were recorded.

"We want to encourage Ugandans to understand that there are no jobs in those countries. Their populations are high and unemployment rates are also high," Mr Kiyenga said.

Destination routes

Authorities revealed that most victims did not travel directly to Cambodia but were instead routed through countries such as China, Thailand and Malaysia, often without full knowledge of their final destination.

"Many thought they were going to work in China, but on arrival they were told to proceed to Cambodia, sometimes using boats. The traffickers never reveal the actual destination," Mr Kiyenga said.

Government says it is coordinating diplomatic and security efforts to secure the release and safe repatriation of the stranded Ugandans, while renewing calls for jobseekers to use only licensed recruitment agencies and travel to officially approved labour destinations.

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