

US Human Trafficking Downgrade 'Regrettable': Myanmar

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Yangon, MYANMAR: Myanmar's new civilian government rebuffed a United States decision to brand the country as one of the world's worst human trafficking offenders on Friday, calling the move "regrettable" at a time when the nascent democracy is still getting on its feet.

The US State Department downgraded Myanmar in its annual human trafficking report Thursday, putting the former junta-run country into the lowest "Tier 3" category for failing to combat people smuggling and slavery.

Years of poverty and corruption under Myanmar's former military rulers have fastened the Southeast Asian nation as a major source of forced labour and sex trafficking.

Democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi is now leading Myanmar's first civilian government in nearly half a century, a move Washington has been keen to support and it lifted a host of financial and trade embargoes last month.

But the downgrade comes after the country spent the four years on the "Tier 2 watch list" -- the maximum period it can be allowed under US law to improve its practices or be demoted to the third tier.

On Friday the Ministry described Washington's decision as "regrettable... at a time when the new democratic government is stepping up its efforts to protect its migrant workers and victims of human trafficking and forced labour".

Human rights groups welcomed the move, calling it long overdue.

"The military is an unreformed institution, continues to use forced labour with impunity, and needs to do more to end the practice," said Matthew Smith, the director of Fortify Rights.

The 2016 State Department report noted that people across Myanmar are subject to exploitation, but stressed that the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority, are "particularly vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking in Rakhine State, including forced labor perpetrated by government authorities".

Tens of thousands of Rohingya have been relegated to squalid displacement camps ever since religious violence tore through their Buddhist-majority state in 2012.

Scores have fled the troubled region on rickety boats bound for Muslim-majority Malaysia.

But many fall into the hands of traffickers who detain and abuse the migrants in Thai jungle camps until their relatives pay release ransoms.

An unprecedented Thai crackdown last year saw more than 90 alleged traffickers arrested and has slowed the tide of dangerous sea crossings.

Thailand was bumped up to Tier 2 in this year's report after spending two years in the lowest category -- a move welcomed by the country's military junta but criticised as premature by rights groups.

- NDTV
