

Media Release

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Thai field research grant to address human trafficking in Asia

The United Nation estimates that at any given time 2.5 million people are in forced labour as a result of human trafficking, with 56 per cent of these people in the Asia Pacific region.

University of Melbourne researcher Ruth Constantine will use her recent grant provided by the Royal Thai Embassy to highlight the issue of people trafficking through the Thai-Burma border.

Ms Constantine's research will focus on the approximately 500,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) from this region of Burma who are trafficked into forced labour.

"IDPs in Burma, who are represented largely by minority groups, are some of the most vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. They are basically invisible, they are stateless people often with no documentation, rights or recognition in either Thailand or Burma," she said.

"I am trying to highlight the problems and give these people a voice. Generally, their plight has not been adequately addressed on any international agenda and I would like to change this."

Ms Constantine will travel to the region in March next year and stay in a tiny Thai village just near the Burmese border for several months and also spend time in Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

"I am keen to speak with around 40 IDPs who may have experienced or are vulnerable to being trafficked across the border, but also speak with those who have escaped their forced labour conditions and are enrolled in rehabilitation programs in the cities," she said.

Ms Constantine's grant is part of a round of grant recipients awarded to 17 students from across Australia, including five from the University of Melbourne. The \$100,000 grant pool provided by the Royal Thai Embassy and administered by the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne is aimed at reinvigorating Thai Studies in Australia.

Director of the Asia Institute Professor Pookong Kee said the Institute was particularly pleased with its close collaboration with the Royal Thai Embassy, particularly over the past 12 months.

"The grants provide a unique opportunity for promising scholars of Thailand across many different disciplines to conduct in-depth field research. We are grateful for the opportunity to reinvigorate Thai Studies in Australia and I am particularly excited to see the outcomes of the research that these scholars will be undertaking."

Mr Kitirat Panupong, First Secretary of the Royal Thai Embassy Canberra said he was keen to set up a Thai Studies Centre in Melbourne as part of the 60th anniversary of Australia and Thailand diplomatic relations in 2012. He was thrilled that the University of Melbourne, through the Asia Institute had shared the Embassy's enthusiasm and vision."

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