Reframing human trafficking as a natural disaster outcome

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Introduction

August of 2026 was full of unfortunate and devastating events. Among them are the earthquake hitting Colombia with a magnitude of 7.4 and the flash flood in the Bhote Koshi River causing catastrophic consequences in Nepal. These disasters often come with hidden or overlooked costs, as the potential social collapse of an affected region leads to the increase of organised crime and exploitation. It is well documented that crises leading to social and economic distress create opportunities for traffickers to operate more smoothly, and they do not let these chances slip away (Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2022). This paper aims to explore how natural disasters and trafficking in human beings are interconnected issues, while shedding light on the current shortcomings of the international framework. Essentially, it will be shown through these exam-

ples that the integration of counter-trafficking measures into emergency policy and humanitarian aid is an urgent necessity.

Disasters as exploitation accelerators

Generally speaking, trafficking in human beings should be considered a multidimensional issue, potentially aggravated by factors such as poverty, environmental disasters, and gender-based violence (International Labour Organization [ILO] & International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2015). Perpetrators often take advantage of the destruction caused by disasters (Swing, 2015).

A good example is the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, which struck with a 7.8 magnitude, leaving behind massive destruction and devastation. The National Human Rights Commission of Nepal concluded that the number of persons trafficked or attempted to traffic in the aftermath of the earthquake increased significantly compared to the numbers shown in its previous reports (National Human Rights Commission, 2016). IOM has reported that in Nepal's male-centred culture women are known victims of trafficking and exploitation, however the crisis has intensified their vulnerable position (IOM, 2015). This case is especially relevant as it showcased how vulnerability stemming from certain social structures and existing socio-economic inequalities further increase after a natural disaster (IOM, 2015). In addition to its multidimensional complexities, human trafficking is affected by climate change on different levels, especially in rural areas (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2024). In such places, in order to compensate for their economic loss, communities tend to engage in activities leading to direct risks. These direct risks include, for example, increase of children trafficked into marriage or forced labour (Annan et al., 2021). In areas where access to food is limited, many individuals resort to unsafe labour migration, giving rise to indirect risks of trafficking (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2015). In a long-term context, structural risks arise, as socio-economic vulnerabilities consistently increase (UNODC, 2024).

Legal framework and its shortcomings

Coming back to this year's abovementioned disasters, these can be used to demonstrate that there is still a fundamental flaw within the international legal framework. As of today, there is no international instrument that treats human trafficking and natural disasters as interconnected domains. The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in conjunction with the Protocol to prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children positions trafficking in human beings mainly as a transnational organised crime issue. Article 9 mandates that Stares Parties should develop comprehensive measures to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, which in this context should automatically mean measures

relating to humanitarian crisis management. Still, based on the current realities, States have failed to adopt effective measures.

Global disaster management policy, codified in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 focuses on physical infrastructure, logistics, and economic resilience. Although these improvements can reduce the risks of vulnerability of individuals and therefore also reduce the risk of becoming a victim of trafficking, there is still no guiding principle promoting the implementation of specialised counter-trafficking measures and safeguards as part of immediate humanitarian responds.

Besides the global frameworks, the regional legal and factual context matters a lot. In Nepal, a relevant element of the regional context is the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which created a 1800-kilometre-long unrestricted border with India. This open border arrangement has reportedly become one of the most used trafficking corridors of the world (European Network of Migrant Women, 2026). The lack of emergency border protection standards means that identity and age verification at this border is not generally possible, even after a flash flood. On top of that, many individuals living in affected areas have lost their essential documents, leaving them in a legally unclear status. Traffickers are not hesitant to exploit this gap, easily moving undocumented individuals into India.

In Colombia, the earthquake exposed a different legal gap, namely the intersection of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law during and after natural disasters affecting areas with active armed conflict. The core issue was the lack of a disaster framework providing guidance when a natural disaster paralyses state authority in an are of ongoing conflicts. State agencies were authorised to provide emergency physical relief but were unable to extend armed protection to informal displacement shelters (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Traffickers exploited this gap as well, through offering false prospects of relief to displaced and undocumented individuals, eventually coercing them into forced labour, sexual exploitation, and military recruitment (IOM, 2026).

These cases clearly demonstrate how the inadequate or nonexistent compliance with the international legal instruments, specifically the lack of effective legislative and operational measures in response to disasters, create the perfect environment for the exploitation of vulnerable groups.

Concluding remarks

The tragedies unfolding across areas affected by environmental disasters expose a regulatory gap in the international legal framework. Trafficking in human beings should not be considered as just a secondary crime occurring on the margins of emergency relief efforts. As demonstrated by the cases of the recent flood in Nepal and the earthquake in Colombia, exploitation is a direct and predictable consequence of natural disasters and the lack of proper instruments addressing this issue.

Closing the gap requires a shift in the interpretation and conceptualisation of trafficking and humanitarian response. When floodwaters wash away documentation of individuals in Nepal or when seismic shocks destroy municipal archives in Colombia, victims fall outside of the scope of personal aid and fall into the hands of criminals ready to exploit their vulnerability.

Ultimately, a humanitarian response that delivers food and clean water to temporary shelters while ignoring the traffickers luring around displacement camps is fundamentally incomplete. Therefore, national authorities should develop comprehensive policies capable of addressing the intersection between climate change, natural disasters, and human trafficking (UNODC, 2024).

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