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Scam Centre-Related Human Trafficking in ASEAN Countries

By Asha Hemrajani

SYNOPSIS

Young people are being trafficked to work in cyber scam centres in ASEAN countries such as Myanmar, Laos, the Philippines, and Cambodia. These centres bring significant revenues to operators but harm ASEAN's reputation and risk the growth of ASEAN economies. Collaboration between law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organisations, and intergovernmental organisations must be stepped up to mitigate the risks.

COMMENTARY

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has called Southeast Asia “[ground zero for the global scamming industry](#)” due to the intensity of scamming activities in the region. People losing funds in scams are not the only victims – a second growing pool of victims is feeding the scourge.

Offered the promise of lucrative job opportunities overseas or the chance to make big money fast, young people are increasingly being tricked into working for scam farms such as [KK Park](#), a gambling compound in Myanmar run by a Chinese criminal organisation. They are recruited via online advertisements (on social media, messaging platforms such as Telegram, or job portals such as [JobStreet](#)) or after being approached at social venues like karaoke bars.

Criminal gangs typically lure scam victims with promises of lucrative jobs and attractive benefits and force them to work in captivity to snare another category of victims into parting with their money through scams involving cryptocurrencies, online love or friendships, and get-rich-quick investments. The International Justice Mission (IJM) has estimated that “US\$16.4 billion is generated from this [new form of trafficking](#) every year in Cambodia alone”.

To date, the bulk of the human trafficking victims have been from China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Middle East. There are increasing news reports of victims coming from more developed Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. In January, Hong Kong's Secretary for Security stated that [eleven Hong Kong residents](#) are still being held against their will in scam farms across ASEAN countries.

In 2023, several [Singaporeans](#) were rescued from a [Chinese-run scam farm](#) called Xinchuang Network Technology in the Philippines. They had been forced to scam fellow Singaporeans and other victims across Asia. Even though the number of Singaporeans forced to work in scam centres has so far been low, it is conceivable that the numbers will increase.

How the Scams Work

Trafficked persons are usually recruited via job advertisements for skilled positions, going through seemingly genuine interviews and then flown to scam farms in remote parts of countries such as the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Once there, they are forced to work in harsh conditions. As in the well-known case of Chinese actor [Wang Xing](#), he was lured to Thailand with the promise of an acting job, then kidnapped while in Thailand and taken over the border to Myanmar to be forced to work on a scam farm.

These victims are unable to leave as their travel documents are withheld. The scam farms are in large compounds, often operating next to legitimate businesses such as casinos. The trafficked victims are handed photos of good-looking people and prepared scripts to use as tools on their potential victims to convince them to part with their savings eventually.

The scam situation has developed to the stage where Chinese tourists, who ranked first among visitors to Thailand in 2024, have expressed concerns about being abducted or lured by criminals for such fraudulent operations. This has resulted in 10,000 [trip cancellations](#) during the last Chinese New Year holidays, posing a significant risk to Thailand's tourism-dependent economy. To alleviate their concerns, Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra released a [video](#) assuring Chinese tourists of their safety when visiting Thailand.

Mitigation Strategies Against the Trafficking

To rescue trafficked victims and to forestall the scammers, a multipronged, multistakeholder approach across different segments of society, including law enforcement, civil society organisations, intergovernmental organisations (IGO), and nongovernment organisations (NGO), has been employed.

Collaboration between the police forces of countries in the region is critical as human trafficking takes place in a country different from where the victim was recruited. Hong Kong law enforcement agencies [collaborated](#) with Thai government agencies to rescue and repatriate 19 Hong Kongers out of 28 [requests for assistance](#) cases.

In addition to cooperation between national law enforcement agencies, NGOs and IGOs are actively working in this space. The [Global Anti-Scam Organisation \(GASO\)](#),

which was founded in Singapore by former scam victims, helps with rescuing trafficking victims stuck at scam farms and works with the victims of scams. GASO claims to have “consolidated approximately 10 big group cases that include ~600 victims, which were accepted by law enforcement” and rescued “63 trafficked victims of Southeast Asia scam companies in Cambodia and Myanmar”.

The [Global Anti-Scam Alliance \(GASA\)](#), on the other hand, is an industry-led body with participation from government agencies, financial institutions, and tech organisations that focuses more on joint preventive actions. The [IJM](#) has collaborated with local governments in handling over 350 trafficked persons and assisted in the prosecution of three perpetrators.

The UNODC is also active, focusing on supporting efforts by “bringing countries together and helping them to agree on [priorities and strategies](#) to fight organised crime”. It established the [Emergency Response Network](#), a platform to help with information exchange among ASEAN law enforcement agencies.

Given the transnational nature of these crimes, governments have found it difficult to take swift legal action, with some resorting to unilateral actions. In January 2025, China's Ministry of Public Security [warned Chinese citizens](#) to beware of fake overseas job offers that could lead to human trafficking for scam farm employment. The Hong Kong SAR government has also issued a similar [warning](#).

The Thai National Security Council was convened to discuss various measures to deal with scam centres along the border with Myanmar. In early February, Thailand cut [power and internet access](#) for areas bordering Myanmar to hamper the operation of the scam centres there. Soon afterwards, Myanmar started the [repatriation](#) of trafficked persons trapped in its scam centres.

The United Nations Convention on Cybercrime

In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Convention against Cybercrime (also referred to as the Hanoi Convention). Barring any unforeseen circumstances, it will be open for signature in mid-2025 and will enter into force three months after being ratified by forty nations, likely in 2026.

At the very least, the Hanoi Convention will help formalise communication channels between governmental agencies and ease information sharing. Currently, much of it is done on an ad-hoc and bilateral basis. Hopefully, these improved communications will pave the way for swifter action against the scam centres.

Conclusion

The UNODC has sounded an alarm bell on the growing scourge of scam centre-related human trafficking in ASEAN countries, describing Southeast Asia as “ground zero for the global scamming industry”. This harms the region's reputation and economic growth, besides causing suffering to those trafficked, their families and the losses suffered by those scammed online.

A multipronged, multistakeholder approach across different segments of society,

including law enforcement, IGOs, and NGOs, has been deployed to rescue trafficked victims and to put obstacles to forestall scamming. Recent reports of more trafficking cases indicate that further efforts are needed across ASEAN. Even though the number of Singaporeans trafficked so far has been low, it is conceivable that more could be lured in the future. As has been done elsewhere, the Singapore authorities should monitor the situation closely and warn residents not to accept job offers that sound too good to be true.

Asha Hemrajani is a Senior Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798