

# Trafficking for Forced Criminality: The Rise of Exploitation in Scam Centres in Southeast Asia

Sasha Jespersen, Henrik Alffram, Lisa Denney and Pilar Domingo

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Labour migration and trafficking in persons: a political economy analysis

## Key messages

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Multiple scam centres have been identified in Southeast Asia, where recruits are often forced to groom victims online and encourage them to invest in fraudulent schemes, such as cryptocurrency.

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Targeting more highly skilled and educated individuals seeking work opportunities, recruitment is more organised than other forms of labour exploitation, with individuals trafficked into forced criminality.

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Scams challenge the existing counter-trafficking response in several ways: The profile of recruits as more highly educated and skilled workers. The existence of two sets of victims – the recruits and their targets. The presence of scam centres, often in poorer countries, reversing conventional labour migration flows. The location of scam centres in Special Economic Zones, which are beyond conventional national jurisdictions.

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## About this publication

This publication has been developed through a research partnership between ASEAN-ACT and ODI. The research involved conducting an applied political economy analysis to understand the dynamics of labour exploitation and trafficking in persons in Southeast Asia in order to: 1) improve the evidence base for ASEAN-ACT and partners' programming and policy engagement; and 2) develop and implement a process for feeding that evidence into ASEAN-ACT and partners' programming and consultations on a regular basis.

The research seeks to advance understanding of the vulnerabilities of labour migrants to exploitation and trafficking. This can contribute to improved response capabilities of state agencies and international programmes to address these issues and strengthen protection and support for labour migrants and victims of trafficking in persons.

Phase 1 of the research project includes four country studies: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Phase 2 of the research project includes four country studies: Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia and the Philippines.

This thematic brief is the second of four in Phase 2. Thematic briefs distil findings from the four country studies on key cross-cutting issues. This brief focuses on exploitation in scam centres across Southeast Asia.

## The research team

Henrik Alffram, Lisa Denney, Pilar Domingo, Sasha Jespersen, Benni Hasbiyalloh, T.M. Huong Ngo, Melvin Jabar, Nyi Nyi Kyaw, Kuanruthai Siripatthanakosol, Leang Sok, Cong Giao Vu, Andika Ab. Wahab and Siliphaithoun Xayamoungkhoun.

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# Acronyms

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ACTIP	ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BGF	Border Guard Force
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
COMMIT	Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking
CSO	civil society organisation
GASO	Global Anti-Scam Organization
ILO	International Labour Organization
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
NGO	non-government organisation
POGO	Philippine Offshore Gaming Organization
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
UNTOC	United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime
\$	USD, unless stated otherwise

# 1 Introduction

A new form of human trafficking has rapidly taken root in the ASEAN region. Individuals are recruited into what are presented as legitimate jobs in digital marketing, customer services and other areas such as construction and translation, and then largely forced to work in scam centres. These centres use deceptive means to recruit workers, largely from abroad, to form online relationships with people in other countries, who are then scammed, for example by encouraging them to invest in fraudulent cryptocurrency transactions.

INTERPOL describes the phenomenon as having developed from a regional-level crime to a global human trafficking crisis, noting that it involves two sets of victims: the workers subjected to forced labour, debt bondage and grave physical abuse, including torture, beatings and rape; and the victims of the online financial scams, which the victims of human trafficking are forced to perpetrate (INTERPOL, 2023).

The intricate fraud schemes are described using the Chinese term *Shāzhūpán*, pig-butcher scams, so-called because they ‘fatten up’ their targets before going in for the ‘slaughter’ and stealing their money (McCready, 2022). An organisation that has been set up to identify, support and rescue individuals forced to work in the scam centres is collecting statistics from people who have been scammed. The organisation has recorded 1,652 victims, with a total loss of \$285 million, an average of \$173,000 per victim (McCready, 2022). In its 2022 Crypto Crime Report, Chainalysis reported that globally \$7.7 billion was stolen through crypto scams in 2021, an increase of 81% from 2020, though it is unclear how much of this is from scam centres (Chainalysis, 2022). Estimates of the revenue generated by scam centres in one South-East Asian country range from \$7.5 to 12.5 billion (UNODC, 2023).

Analysis of the political economy of labour trafficking in the ASEAN region highlights challenges many countries face in identifying, rescuing and supporting victims to obtain legal redress. When victims of human trafficking are forced into criminality, this adds another challenge – determining whether they are victims of trafficking and/or are also criminals. Moreover, many scam centres operate in special economic zones (SEZs), areas with generally weaker regulatory environments and (in some cases) limited presence of law-enforcement officers (Strangio, 2021; Berlinger, 2020). In Lao People’s Democratic Republic (hereafter Laos), for instance, these SEZs are also home to foreign-run casinos that attract different types

of criminal behaviour, including money laundering and trafficking of drugs, exotic animals and persons (Gore et al., 2022; Kennedy and Southern, 2022). This form of trafficking provides a unique opportunity for labour exploitation.

This thematic brief draws on research undertaken by ODI for the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) Program, looking at the political economy of vulnerability to trafficking of cross-border labour migrants in the ASEAN region. Country studies have been undertaken in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Using a political economy lens makes it easier to understand the formal and informal institutions and incentives that sustain the vulnerability of labour migrants to trafficking, and hamper more effective responses. The brief synthesises findings from the eight country studies, with the aim of distilling key messages for the counter-trafficking community, in particular for ASEAN-ACT to guide future programming. Following this introduction, section 2 sets out what has driven the emergence of scam centres in the region. Section 3 details the nature of scamming operations and human trafficking in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines. Section 4 considers the unique challenges that scam centres pose to counter-trafficking efforts and current ways of working. Finally, section 5 presents ideas for how the counter-trafficking community might adapt to address this growing form of trafficking.

## 2 The emergence of scam centres

Multiple variables have conspired to create the conditions for scam centres in Southeast Asia. In particular, their emergence is linked to the growth of Chinese gambling facilities across the region, such as Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines. In parallel, many of these countries, particularly Cambodia, have hosted small-scale extortion rings that are operated by Chinese nationals and target other Chinese nationals. This phenomenon is driven by two forces. First, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded its economic presence in Southeast Asia and further afield, but alongside this, Chinese organised crime groups have also expanded their activities (Purbrick, 2022a). Second, President Xi Jinping's crackdown on gambling across the region and travel restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented Chinese tourists from visiting casinos and limited the movement of Chinese workers, created a demand for gambling facilities to be repurposed. As the ASEAN region has high numbers of migrant workers, and an inadequate response to human trafficking, as the country case studies highlighted, the result has been a boom in scam centres.

Since gambling has been illegal in mainland China since 1949, Macau became its unofficial gambling capital. With a long history of gambling under Portuguese rule, Macau's return to China in 1999 fostered a booming industry, which was opened to multinational companies in 2002 (De Guzman, 2022). There has also been longstanding involvement of the Triads in the gambling industry in Macau, which has expanded across Southeast Asia (Purbrick, 2022b; Fraser, 2021). Before the pandemic, Macau's revenue from gambling, its main industry, was \$36 billion (De Guzman, 2022).

Macau is not the only benefactor of the Chinese appetite for gambling. Many countries have legalised gambling and built casinos to capture demand, with around 340 in Southeast Asia (The Economist, 2022). The Asia–Pacific region is home to the world's fastest-growing market for gambling, even though it is illegal in several countries in the region, including China (outside Macau) and Laos (Gore et al., 2022: 4-5). While benefiting their host countries (or, more often, the countries' political elite) through tax revenue and informal payments, many casinos are owned by Chinese entrepreneurs. The impact on host countries is more evident in relation to the social costs.



In Laos, for example, the government has established SEZs on long-term leases to Chinese companies to build, own and operate casinos, such as the Kings Roman casino in the Golden Triangle SEZ (Stimson Centre, 2021). By contrast, the Philippines has become a hub for online gambling, with the emergence of the Philippines Offshore Gaming Operators (POGO). These Chinese-owned companies operate offshore gaming from the Philippines, with IP addresses that can only be accessed outside the Philippines. While POGOs are legal in the Philippines, they operate in a grey zone, where other criminal activity often takes place (see IAG, 2023). Other countries, such as Cambodia, have taken a similar approach, whereby gambling is designed to capture the Chinese or other foreign market, but is illegal for nationals. Many of Cambodia's casinos are located in border towns with Thailand, Laos and Vietnam to allow those nationals to cross for gaming day trips.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of the gambling industry was affected by COVID-19, as well as a Chinese crackdown on gambling. Since Xi Jinping became president in 2012, his anti-corruption campaign has targeted gambling, and more recently Macau's role as a gambling hub, which has pushed these operations further afield (De Guzman, 2022). Other countries have also come under pressure. The Chinese government pressured the governments of Cambodia and the Philippines to ban online gambling because it provided an opportunity for Chinese citizens to gamble. Cambodia stopped renewing and issuing gaming licenses in 2019, which led to many Chinese nationals to leave Cambodia and gaming premises were abandoned. The ban on online gambling and the resulting vacant properties were key factors behind the growth of scam centres.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Cambodia, the Philippines has continued to renew and issue licenses, although there is extensive debate among Philippine politicians on the value of the POGO sector in the country (IAG, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions meant that existing casinos in less stringent jurisdictions, such as the Myanmar border areas and SEZs such as the Golden Triangle, sought to shift their operations towards scams.

Alongside the growth of the gambling sector in Southeast Asia, scams have also been evolving. Since 2011, there have been reports of Chinese scammers running small-scale extortion operations from Cambodia to target their own nationals (McCready, 2022). The first raid on a large-scale operation – with over 200 scammers – was in late 2017, but the workers were Chinese nationals (Lefevre and Thul, 2017).

The banning of cryptocurrency in China in 2021 created a need to expand the reach of the scam centres to targets beyond than China. The timing of this shift aligned with challenges in casinos and online

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Nathan Southern, August 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Interview, Nathan Southern, August 2023.

gaming centres, which have encouraged a shift in their activities because of difficulty in accessing Chinese clients, whether because of travel restrictions or pressure from the Chinese government. With back-end systems that can support scams, these have created the ideal conditions for scam centres to flourish.

### **Box 1      Cryptocurrency and Organised Crime**

The wider importance of cryptocurrency as an enabler of organised crime has also fuelled the growth of scam centres. In many parts of the world, organised crime groups are transferring their assets into cryptocurrency to avoid detection and asset seizures (see, for example, Farah and Richardson, 2023). By encouraging investment in cryptocurrency, the groups behind the scam centres can skip a step in the money-laundering chain by obtaining undetectable revenue directly.

#### **2.1      Trafficking into Forced Criminality**

Organised crime groups are continually adapting to attempts to curtail their profit-making activities. This is particularly evident with human trafficking, where traffickers seek to distance themselves from the physical movement of people and their exploitation (Jespersen et al., 2019). Trafficking into forced criminality has been used elsewhere to exploit the challenges authorities may face in distinguishing victims of trafficking from criminals. For example, large numbers of Vietnamese minors were trafficked into cannabis farms in the UK, and charged with drug production if they were discovered, until NGOs addressing human trafficking advocated on their behalf (see, for example, Ramiz et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2015).

Similarly, workers in scam centres are engaged in criminal activities – encouraging their targets to invest in cryptocurrency or deposit money in gaming accounts, which are then kept by the groups running the scam centres. While most workers in scam centres are forced to engage in these activities, a minority choose to stay because of the potential to make money.<sup>3</sup>

For those who try to leave, some are told they need to pay large sums or must find replacements, which would make them complicit in trafficking.

### **Box 2      Scam Centres and Organised Crime**

Compared to other forms of labour trafficking, the creation and operation of scam centres appears to be more organised than some forms of labour trafficking, managed by Chinese entrepreneurs. One individual, She Zhijiang (also known as She Lunkai, Dylan She and Tang Kriang Kai) is the chairman of Yatai International Holdings, which is registered in Hong Kong and headquartered in Bangkok, with

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<sup>3</sup> Interview, Nathan Southern, August 2023.

significant business interests in Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines, including casinos (Nachemson, 2020). There is also evidence of training manuals that include scripts for scams, indicating how professionalised these tactics have become (SCARS, 2022).

Organisations behind the scam centres are also linked to an online trade in human beings, using platforms such as Telegram. The White Shark Telegram channel has been used to sell forced recruits to scam centres (Haffner and Dara, 2022).

## 3 The nature of scams in the region

In Southeast Asia, scam centres have been identified in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, and there are intricate connections between countries. Scam centres are often linked to weak governance and rule of law, and where governance is contested, as is the case in Myanmar; or in SEZs, where there are weak regulatory environments (OHCHR, 2023). Although they are a relatively recent phenomenon, scam centres have grown rapidly, and it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of people have been forced into scamming across the region (OHCHR, 2023).

Exploitation in scam centres clearly fits the definition of human trafficking. A key issue that has arisen through the analysis of labour trafficking in the eight countries researched was whether it reaches the threshold of human trafficking or is better conceived as labour exploitation. The use of deception to recruit people to work in scam centres meets a key element in the legal definition of human trafficking. The working conditions that these recruits endure, and the strategies used to prevent them from leaving, are also clear indications of trafficking.

Once workers arrive at the scam centres, their passports and other documents are confiscated, making it difficult to leave. Mobile phones are also confiscated, and the use of phones and the internet in the scam centres are monitored closely. In addition, many of the centres are located in isolated areas, which makes it harder to raise the alarm or seek assistance.

Workers in scam centres labour between 12 and 20 hours a day, six days a week, and receive only limited medical attention or food (IJM, 2022). Reports indicate the workers have daily targets for the number of people to scam and are punished if they do not reach them. Some reports refer to the use of electrocution as a form of punishment.<sup>4</sup> In others, there are references to being beaten, deprived of food, or had deductions from their salary even for minor infringements (IJM, n.d.).

### **Box 3 Evolving methods of recruitment**

Originally recruits were targeted through advertisements for jobs in digital marketing and customer services, but this has expanded to

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Philippines, April 2023.

include offers that are ‘too good to be true’. For example, qualified engineers have been recruited into apparently legitimate jobs on construction sites, and translators have been targeted.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1 Laos

In Laos, the government has established 12 SEZs, with varying levels of regulatory authority, with another 40 apparently planned (Lao Ministry of Investment and Planning, 2021; Laungaramsri, 2017). Two of the existing SEZs – Boten and the Golden Triangle – have been home to casinos, while the others appear to host industrial developments, facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI) and cross-border supply-chain links (Lao Ministry of Investment and Planning, 2021). Five of these SEZs are leased to Chinese companies, including the largest, the Golden Triangle SEZ in Bokeo Province on the border with Thailand and Myanmar (Stimson Centre, 2021; Berlinger, 2020). On a 75-year lease to the Chair of the Kings Romans Group, Zhao Wei, the SEZ is home to the Kings Romans Casino surrounded by apartment complexes, hotels, nightclubs, shops and restaurants (Gore et al., 2022: 18; Strangio, 2021; Laungaramsri, 2017). Zhao Wei previously owned a casino in Mong La in Myanmar catering to the Chinese market.

In 2018, Zhao Wei was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for engaging in ‘drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, bribery, and wildlife trafficking, much of which is facilitated through the Kings Romans Casino’ (Strangio, 2021; US Treasury Department, cited in Whong, 2020). The Golden Triangle SEZ has also now encompasses scam centres (Southern and Kennedy, 2022). Labour migrants from Laos as well as Myanmar, Thailand and further afield, respond to job advertisements on Facebook offering large salaries to work in call centres; and on arriving in the SEZ, are reportedly confined to call centres where they are given unrealistic sales targets to sell cryptocurrency and fraudulent ‘shares’ in companies. Those who do not meet the targets are reportedly forced into work in and around the casinos, including sex work (RFA Laos, 2022). Others report having their mobile phones and documents confiscated, and their pay deducted to cover ‘debts’ to brokers who facilitated their employment and for accommodation to stay at the scam centre (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023: 47-48).

In June 2022, 500 individuals were rescued from the SEZ, many of whom had been working in scam centres, trying to convince people to invest or buy shares in the Kings Roman Casino (RFA Lao, 2022). A group of 22 Thai nationals were also able to escape from a scam centre in the Golden Triangle SEZ and reported they were threatened with being sold to other companies or into sex work if they did not meet their sales targets (UCA News, 2022; Whong, 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, Nathan Southern, August 2023.

## 3.2 Cambodia

A similar transition has occurred in parts of Cambodia. In 2016, Sihanoukville on the southern coast experienced a Chinese-led construction boom, with more than 100 casinos built or planned, and over 300,000 Chinese nationals moving into the area (Al Jazeera, 2019). In 2019, however, the Cambodian government introduced a ban on online gambling, which resulted in the closure of many casinos, as online gambling was a core component of the business, alongside in-person gambling (Thul, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 made in-person gambling aimed at Chinese clients unviable because of travel restrictions. With the back-end systems to host scam centres, and many stranded foreign workers, Sihanoukville was transformed into a hub for scam centres (Blomberg, 2021).

There are also purpose-built scam centres in Cambodia, particularly in the Sen Sok region of Phnom Penh, but the most notorious are in the border regions of Poipet, Ream, Sihanoukville, Koh Kong and Bavet. Many are operated by Chinese nationals, as well as by nationals from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Taiwan (McCready, 2022).

In Cambodia, it is estimated that 100,000 workers are forced to work in the scam centres (OHCHR, 2023). Many workers come from other countries in the Southeast Asian region, but Cambodia is also now a destination country for workers from Africa and Europe. Thai police have reported that, more than 800 Thai men and women were rescued from 'scam call centres' in Cambodia between October 2021 and April 2022. At the time, there were at least another 1,000 Thai citizens working in similar call centres according to Thai police. Workers in the online and telephone gambling and financial scam operations have been subjected to illegal detention, starvation, and physical abuse, including beatings, whipping and electrocution (Reuters, 2022; Saksornchai, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2022). The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Cambodia, Vitit Muntarbhorn, referred to the victims' situation as a 'living hell' (Manila Times, 2022). Domestic NGOs allege the complicity of police officers and the involvement of well-known entrepreneurs and politicians in the scam and forced labour operations (Mech Dara et al., 2022; Saksornchai, 2022).

In 2017, the Chinese tycoon She Zhijiang was given Cambodian citizenship. His business empire reportedly includes casinos and other investments in several countries in the region, including Myanmar, discussed below. She Zhijiang was arrested in Thailand in 2022 for running illegal online gambling operations (SCMP, 2022).

## 3.3 Myanmar

In Myanmar, Shwe Kokko Myaing is a major hub for scam centres. It is the home of the Yatai New City, known as the Yatai Shwe Kokko

SEZ – a development funded by an expatriate Chinese businessman, in partnership with the Myanmar army-affiliated Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) – to establish a hub for online gambling. The area has long been beyond the reach of the Myanmar government, and was previously a centre for cattle smugglers and Karen insurgents, but it has now been dubbed a Special Criminal Zone (Zaw, 2023).

#### **Box 4 China distances itself from Shwe Kokko SEZ**

Yatai New City was initially part of China's BRI, with aims for it to become Myanmar's Silicon Valley. As discussed above, Chinese criminal networks have also taken advantage of the BRI, and the expertise and infrastructure in Yatai New City was repurposed for criminal activity, to the extent that the Chinese government distanced itself and the BRI from the area (Zaw, 2023).

Gambling companies from Cambodia and the Philippines have been encouraged to relocate to Shwe Kokko after the Cambodian and Philippine governments put pressure on the industry, such as a ban in Cambodia, and more stringent licensing requirements in the Philippines. By 2019, several casinos had started working in Shwe Kokko (Karen Peace Support Network, 2020). Its development was suspended in 2020 in attempt to bring the area under state control, with the military demanding the resignation of the BGF (Han et al., 2021), although it was forced to negotiate with the BGF at the time of the coup in February 2021.

#### **Box 5 The Karen Border Guard Force**

The Myanmar army has sought to divide the ethnic armed forces and buy off individual commanders by offering factions of these armed force status as Border Guard Forces (BGF) with a high degree of local autonomy, control over cross-border trade and freedom to engage in lucrative criminal activities. Along Myanmar's borders, a range of casinos and scam centres funded by criminal enterprises and protected by BGFs have emerged since the February 2021 military coup.

The Karen BGF has its roots in a 1994 breakaway from the Karen National Union/Liberation Army (KNLA). In around 2010, KNLA aligned itself with the Myanmar armed forces and obtained status as BGF. The commander of the Karen BGF was given permission to develop the Shwe Kokko area, the best-known of the trafficking and organised crime hubs along the border with Thailand (Abuza, 2023).

Following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the project resumed and was completed (Frontier, 2022). While ostensibly a hub for online gaming, most workers recruited into the casinos are forced into the scam centres. Because of the involvement of the BGF in the



project, the town is full of soldiers as well as Chinese security guards. In addition to the isolated location of Shwe Kokko, this presence makes it difficult for workers to escape (Frontier, 2022). Workers have reportedly been subjected to physical abuse for not following instruction or for under-performing, and families have been asked to pay ransom for their release (Chan, 2022).

In 2022, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were believed to be held against their will in Shwe Kokko, but it is estimated that this number has increased dramatically (Pollard, 2022). The total number of human trafficking victims in Myanmar's various so-called 'criminal zones' or 'unofficial Special Economic Zones' is believed to be many times higher. According to one account, the so-called KK Zone, located on the Moei River on the Thai–Myanmar border has, for instance, 10,000 enslaved people (USIP, 2022). Seventeen other compounds have been identified elsewhere along the Moei River and there are reports of further activity in Kokang Self-Administered Zone in Shan State and the Wa-administered city of Mong La on the Chinese border (McCready and Mendelson, 2023; OHCHR, 2023).

While some zones, like Shwe Kokko, were illegally established before the 2021 military coup, reports of their links to human trafficking did not start to flourish until after the coup. The possibility of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the media to monitor, document and report on what goes on in the zones is very limited.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.4 Philippines

The Philippines is primarily a recruitment hub for scam centres abroad, with many reports of individuals deceived into working in scam centres in Cambodia and Myanmar. There are also reports of other nationals being recruited into scam centres in the Philippines. With the departure of many POGOs from the Philippines, the infrastructure has also been used for scam centres.<sup>7</sup> Recently, Indonesians were identified in several buildings in Manila engaging in 'love scams' targeting other Indonesians (Patag, 2023). In addition, some POGOs have continued to operate illegally, with people of various nationalities forced to work. In one raid in June 2023, 2,714 workers were rescued from an illegal POGO (Calawan, 2023). Senator Shermin Gatchalian reported that 4,000 victims had been rescued from POGOs in June and July 2023 (CNN, 2023).

The number of POGOs peaked in 2019, but the shutdown of operations in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many leaving the country. There are now 36 licensed companies, and many more operating without a license.<sup>8</sup>

Filipinos are a particular target for recruitment because so many of them speak English and can target individuals in Australia, the US

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<sup>6</sup> Interviews, Myanmar, May and June 2023 [online interviews with informants in Myanmar].

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Philippines, April 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Philippines, April 2023.



and elsewhere. Other nationalities often target nationals from their own country.

For example, as in the case documented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) of Flor,<sup>9</sup> a Philippine national, who responded to an advertisement on Facebook for a customer service representative in Thailand.<sup>10</sup> She travelled to Bangkok on a tourist visa, which is a straightforward process, as ASEAN nationals do not require visas to enter other ASEAN countries on a temporary basis. But on her arrival in Bangkok, she was met by an escort, who transported her to Myanmar.<sup>11</sup>

Ridwan, an Indonesian national, applied to work in the Philippines as a digital marketer. He was greeted by an escort at the airport, who guided him through the Bureau of Quarantine and Immigration counters. He was then taken to an apartment building near the airport, where he was instructed to scam Indonesian nationals, targeting them on Tinder, Facebook and Instagram, building a fictitious romantic relationship, and encouraging them to invest in cryptocurrency (PNA, 2023).

Some workers have managed to leave the centres by buying their freedom or promising to recruit others to replace them. In the Philippines, an Indonesian worker in a scam centre was required to pay PHP100,000 [\$1,800] to cover the expenses to bring him to the Philippines in order to leave (PNA, 2023). There are also cases where workers are told they need to seek their own replacement if they are to leave.

## **Box 6      The role of Thailand**

In March 2023, Thai police raided nine scam centres in four Thai provinces, arresting 21 suspects (SCMP, 2023). This was the first confirmation that scam centres were active in the country. Thailand has become a prominent transit hub for victims deceived into working at scam centres throughout the region (OHCHR, 2023). Many recruits have responded to ads for jobs in Bangkok and flown there before being transferred to other locations. For instance, the IOM (2023) documents the account of an Indonesian deceived into taking a job in Thailand in online marketing and being forcibly taken to Myanmar to undertake scamming work.

Measures to identify and protect victims of trafficking in Thailand, such as the *National Referral Mechanism on the Protection and Assistance of Victims of Trafficking*, set up in March 2022, provide a key institutional process to address this, but its operations remain patchy and fragmented (US Department of State, 2023). Local organisations working in the border areas provide channels of

<sup>9</sup> Names have been changed to protect the survivors' identity.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Philippines, April 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Philippines, April 2023.

support for victims, including through referral to the embassies of the countries of origin, which underlines the importance of greater regional coordination in this regard.

## 4 How scams challenge the existing counter-trafficking response

Scam centres are a lucrative activity for organised crime groups in Southeast Asia. With hundreds of thousands of people working in scam centres, and team targets of up to \$25,000 per day, the profits are massive (McReady and Mendelson, 2023). Analysis of expected revenue in one Southeast Asian country indicates that revenue is at least \$7.5 to 12.5 billion (UNODC, 2023).

In recent years, these centres have rapidly expanded across the region. With the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of growth has taken authorities by surprise. Links to casinos and SEZs situates scam centres within a complex criminal architecture that involves the trafficking of drugs, human beings and wildlife as well as money laundering (Southern and Kennedy, 2022). The role of cryptocurrency and links to Chinese organised crime presents specific investigative challenges. But the presence of scam centres in countries with a poor record of addressing corruption, judicial integrity and rule of law also weakens the response, creating a conducive operating environment.

In addition, the experiences of trafficking in the scam centres, often around casinos and in SEZs or offshore, poses unique challenges to counter-trafficking responses and is subverting some of the accepted wisdom among those working on counter-trafficking. The rise of trafficking as forced criminality through scamming thus requires new approaches to prevent and respond to this phenomenon.

First, the migration that the scam centres encourage is distinctive. While most labour migration flows tend to go from poorer to wealthier countries in the region, driven by limited job prospects in the countries of origin and more attractive pay in destination countries, the flows are inverted in the case of the scam centres. In these cases, recruits from all countries – both poorer and wealthier – travel to what are often poorer countries in the region. It is noteworthy that Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines are the largest destinations for scam centres and are also the poorest countries in ASEAN. This calls into question whether existing approaches to improve safe migration need to reorient their focus.

Second, the labour migrants involved have a different profile from that found in other labour migration. While most labour migrants are poorer people (although not necessarily the poorest) who migrate in search of better chances of earning a living, the scam centres are changing this profile. Generally, workers recruited to scam centres respond to advertisements on social media for jobs that sound legitimate and offer good salaries and working conditions. They also require education and experience – not the low or unskilled jobs often associated with exploitation in the ASEAN region.

Although it is unknown how many migrants work in the Golden Triangle SEZ, it is estimated that 96% of jobs are performed by foreign migrant workers (Stimson Centre, 2021). Many are Burmese (Laungaramsri, 2017), but reports suggest others also come from a wide range of countries, including China, Laos, Russia, Thailand and Vietnam (Gore et al., 2022: 20; US State Department, 2022: 344; Whong, 2022).

**Figure 1 Example recruitment post**



Source: Thompson Reuters Foundation

The differences among labour migrants deceived into scam operations means that existing ways of working on counter-trafficking may be inadequate. For instance, targeting economic push/pull factors and educating people in poorer areas in source countries on safe migration might be less relevant for this pattern of recruitment, given that it is more educated people who are migrating. Because those who are recruited into scam centres are educated, they do not imagine that they might fall prey to deception.

Training law enforcement personnel in detection, investigation and prosecution may also be of limited value when scam centres are linked to powerful figures and operate in zones where law enforcement have limited presence or authority to act. In Cambodia, for instance, individuals who have escaped scam centres and report to authorities have disappeared, been punished for escaping and even returned to the scam centres or face reprisals (Kennedy, Southern and Yan, 2022). This suggests some degree of complicity between law enforcement and the powerful figures involved in operating scams. Similarly, scam centres operating in SEZs pose difficulties, as law enforcement and the justice sector may not operate in these regions, remote 'criminal zones' or offshore. For example, in Laos' Golden Triangle, the SEZ runs its own affairs and operates its own internal security, effectively placing it outside the country's legislative jurisdiction. While interviewees were unclear about the precise laws, local authorities do not feel empowered or authorised to enter the SEZ unless the prime minister has granted permission (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). Consequently, the ability of law enforcement to investigate or intervene is severely constrained.

Clearly, there is a need for new approaches.

## 5 What can be done?

Trafficking into scam centres is part of a complex and sophisticated transnational organised crime network, which calls for collaboration with government and other partners that goes beyond a response to human trafficking.

### **Encourage a Regional Response**

International collaboration is essential. The evolution of scam centres reveals that the criminal gangs behind them are choosing locations where they are less likely to face scrutiny. Thus a weak response in one jurisdiction will create an opening to set up scam centres.

There are some initiatives underway. On 10 May 2023, an **ASEAN Declaration** was issued on the use and misuse of technology to facilitate human trafficking. Although the declaration does not refer specifically to scam centres, it is understood that it will do so. There is also scope for more action at the regional level.

**Discussion facilitated by ASEAN on scams, casinos, official and unofficial SEZs and the laws and regulations** under which they operate would provide a forum for laws to be synchronised and consistent. The ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons includes a clause on the non-punishment principle, for example, which is particularly relevant in relation to trafficking into forced criminality.

**Cooperation with China** is also an important strategy for addressing scam centres. Given the role of Chinese organised crime groups in scam centres in the region – as well as the experience of the Chinese justice system in dealing with organised crime – this may involve cooperation with criminal justice agencies in China and other affected countries to share information, learn from their experience, and coordinate responses. This is already being done through government-led processes, including a joint campaign on law enforcement across China, Myanmar and Thailand (Caixin Global, 2023). The COMMIT Process should also be used as a platform to raise concerns related to scam centres, casinos and SEZs.

## **Address Scam Centres Online**

The online nature of scam centres – both in their activities and their recruitment – create a vulnerability that can be targeted in responses.

Between June 2021 and June 2022, the Australian Cyber Security Centre collaborated with partners on five successful **operations against criminal online marketplaces and foreign scam networks** (ACSC, 2022). It is crucial to support these operations.

Online recruitment is also a significant trend among scam centres. The **involvement of social media providers**, such as Facebook, to verify the credibility of job advertisements would increase the safety of prospective migrants. Much remains unknown about online recruitment, advertisers frequently change their methods and there is a high threshold for social media providers to take action.

**Planning, studies and pilot interventions** should be developed to respond to this trend and establish appropriate protection. This might include digital literacy, awareness raising and training, as well as investing in learning about the benefits and risks of online recruitment. As with existing forms of recruitment, online recruitment is to be likely diverse – some regular, some irregular and some outright deceptive and exploitative. It will be important to develop responses to address this diversity.

## **Prevent Recruitment to Scam Centres, Casinos, SEZs**

There is a need to deter people from travelling to known scam locations, such as the Golden Triangle SEZ, although many are not told the location of their work and do not know where they are. Documenting the treatment of labour migrants in scam centres, casinos and SEZs could help to raise awareness about such areas, where transparency and oversight are very low. This may also help make educated individuals applying for jobs online more vigilant.

There is also a need both to push for greater access to existing SEZs, as well as to inform the regulations and agreements established in future SEZs in order to incorporate better labour protections from the outset.

## **Increase Intelligence-based Responses**

Analysis of recruitment trends and how recruits are transported to scam centres could be used to establish points in source and transit hubs where it is possible to provide assistance. One possibility is to make it more difficult for handlers to operate in the arrivals areas of airports, although the agility of the scam centres means there is a high risk of displacement, which means these strategies need to be combined with other measures.

Because exploitation in scam centres, casinos and SEZs is more closely linked to organised crime than other forms of labour

trafficking, there is scope to use criminal investigations, in particular of illicit financial flows and the shell companies linked to scam centres, freezing assets and disrupting supply chains that intersect with the formal economy.

### **Support Civil Society Responses**

Voluntary groups have been set up to support and rescue trafficking victims, such as the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO). Such groups are often formed by survivors of the scam centres, or victims of the scams, who realise that the person who targeted them is also a victim (McCready, 2022). There have been cases where leaders of these organisations have been arrested and mistreated by local authorities (see Kennedy et al., 2022). Providing support and visibility for these organisations could deter mistreatment.



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