

## Forced scamming - an emerging form of modern slavery

For the past few years, law enforcement authorities have seen the rise of a new form of modern slavery: forced scamming. Victims of this new crime modality are lured through fake job adverts to scamming compounds located in casinos, hotels, and gambling centres, and forced to engage in cyber-fraud on an industrial scale. While online fraud is not a new phenomenon, this type of criminal activity has experienced an unprecedented escalation in the post-pandemic landscape, becoming progressively linked to human trafficking and labour exploitation and expanding in scale and geographical reach.

Hundreds of thousands of people of more than 20 nationalities are currently forced to engage in online fraudulent activities throughout Southeast Asia and Africa. It is estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 people are trapped in this type of modern slavery in Cambodia alone, generating profits of more than 12 billion dollars per year for criminal groups.<sup>1</sup> According to INTERPOL, forced scamming is now a global crisis “representing a serious and imminent threat to public safety”<sup>2</sup>

### Drivers of the unprecedented uptick in forced scamming

The COVID-19 pandemic created a favourable scenario for the unprecedented uptick in forced scamming. On the one hand, digitalisation rates grew exponentially during pandemic lockdowns, forcing many professional and personal activities to be conducted almost exclusively online. At the same time, it rendered many workers jobless, desperate for professional opportunities and willing to travel abroad in search for employment, which widened the potential pools of victims for this emerging modality of modern slavery.

Criminal groups quickly took advantage of these conditions as soon as COVID-19 related measures started to ease off in late 2021, tricking, trafficking, and trapping thousands of victims in heavily guarded compounds where they are forced to interact online with overseas social media users and engage in cyber-fraud.

### Modus operandi and victim profile

Typically, these criminal networks – primarily Chinese criminal syndicates, usually allied with domestic traffickers and unscrupulous recruitment agencies – post ads on social media platforms and recruitment sites promising unsuspecting foreign

applicants lucrative jobs in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and, more recently, other Southeast Asian and African nations. Upon their arrival in the destination countries, the victims are kidnapped, locked in, and forced to work up to 20 hours a day perpetrating a range of fraudulent activities online, including romance scams, cryptocurrency investment schemes, online gambling, and betting.

Individuals targeted by these organisations share some characteristics that distinguish them from “conventional” modern slavery victims. They tend to be skilled, tech-savvy and computer knowledgeable professionals in their twenties and thirties, many of them with university degrees and able to speak more than one language, who became unemployed during the pandemic or have been unable to hold stable jobs since then.<sup>3</sup> Most of these forced scammers are ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia, although there is a growing number of African, Australian, European, and even US and UK nationals falling victims of this new form of modern slavery.



Source: INTERPOL (2023).

Data from INTERPOL indicates that these modern slavery victims generate between 300 and 400 dollars (USD) a day in their work as scammers to the benefit of their exploiters. Failure to meet the “business targets” set by the exploiters frequently results in victims being subject to physical and sexual violence, starved, and eventually re-trafficked for other types of forced labour, prostitution or even organ harvesting. Some of these forced scammers manage to pay ransom money – ranging from USD 3,000 to 30,000 – to leave the scamming centres, but usually end up highly indebted, as their families typically have to take out loans to rescue them.

## Policy responses and challenges

National authorities in several Southeast Asian countries have issued warnings to alert their citizens about the increasing threat of recruitment traps and forced scamming more generally, and some have led successful rescue operations that were able to free hundreds of victims from scamming compounds. For instance, in October 2022 authorities in Cambodia rescued 75 foreigners from a casino who had been illegally trafficked into the country. Earlier this year, police in the Philippines rescued more than 2,700 workers - from more than a dozen countries - from working for fraudulent online gaming sites and other cybercrime groups.<sup>4</sup>

Several regional and international initiatives have also been launched with the goal of enhancing the effectiveness of the fight against this crime, and various memorandums of understanding have been signed between national governments seeking to strengthen cross-national cooperation, information-sharing and investigative assistance. Additionally, the US State Department has pointed to the upsurge in this new form of modern slavery, downgrading Cambodia's rating to the lowest level in its 2022 Trafficking in Persons annual report.<sup>5</sup>

However, policy responses to the emergence of forced scamming have been slow to develop and are still largely inefficient. Law enforcement agencies in Cambodia, Myanmar and other epicentres of cyber fraud do not necessarily have recourse to effective laws or are unaware of the legislation in place to protect victims. The few rescue missions that have been launched are conducted on a case-by-case basis and remain limited given the large number of victims trapped in this type of exploitation.

More importantly, local authorities dealing with individuals rescued from scamming compounds are not always familiar with forced scamming as a form of trafficking. Online scamming is different from other types of modern slavery: it usually takes place in "modern" office settings and involves relatively educated victims. Hence, officers and authorities faced with forced scammers frequently tend to view them as criminals or accomplices of criminal organisations, rather than as victims, and thus do not always act in line with the protocols in place to protect victims of forced criminality. In fact, it is not uncommon that victims who are freed (or manage to escape) from scamming compounds end up locked in detention centres as their visas may have expired and authorities require them to pay a fine in order to allow them to return home.

## Moving Forward

The proliferation of victims of forced scamming is a prime example of the evolution of new forms of modern slavery. Although increased attention is being paid to this relatively novel phenomenon, national governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations, and civil society actors must take more decisive steps to tackle this type of crime. Possible measures in this direction include:

- Providing police officers and relevant actors in the judicial system with effective training and capacity-building aimed at enhancing their understanding of this form of trafficking and the realities faced by victims of forced scamming.
- Ensuring that law enforcement bodies and local authorities understand and abide by the non-punishment principle - protecting individuals from criminal responsibility for acts they were forced to commit as a victim of trafficking.
- Involving embassies and consulates of the victims' countries of origin in efforts to locate and identify citizens trapped in scamming compounds and proactively contacting local authorities.
- Providing survivors with comprehensive support systems - including legal and financial aid - following their rescue from scamming compounds and throughout their re-integration journey.
- Treating survivors of forced scamming as informants in order to prosecute source country traffickers.

1 IJM (2023).

2 INTERPOL (2023)

3 Chiang, Mina, and Valentina Casulli (2023).

4 Associated Press (2023).

5 Trafficking in Persons Report (2022).

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