



GLOBAL
INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

COMPOUND CRIME

CYBER SCAM OPERATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

MAY 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research report was produced by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Observatory of Illicit Economies in Asia-Pacific in partnership with the Australian-funded ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking programme and the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not the views of the Australian Government.

The publication was drafted by Kristina Amerhauser and Audrey Thill with support from Martin Thorley, Louise Taylor and Matt Herbert. Sincere appreciation goes to the external reviewer, Jason Tower, from the United States Institute of Peace for his comments and feedback as well as to the technical experts at the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking programme and the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime who provided input.

The report is based on qualitative and quantitative data and analysis collected by researchers based in and working across Southeast Asia. The team would like to thank Lindsey Kennedy and Nathan Paul Southern, who work for The Eyewitness Project, Matt Blomberg, Aung Khant Si Thu, Yu Mon Htay, and the researchers at Humanity Research Consultancy (HRC) and the Asia Centre for their hard work and dedication to this research. We would also like to thank others who prefer to remain anonymous as well as the many interview partners for their open and frank insights and contributions.

The team would also like to thank the GI-TOC's Publications team.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BGF	Border Guard Force
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
COA	Cambodian Oknha Association
GDP	Gross domestic product
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GTSEZ	Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone
ISP	Internet service provider
KNA	Karen National Army
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAGCOR	Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation
POGO	Philippine offshore gaming operator
SEZ	Special economic zone
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UWSA	United Wa State Army



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the world grappled with policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, criminals across Southeast Asia seized an opportunity to gear up cyber scam operations on an extraordinary scale. Where casinos, hotels and resorts lay empty due to travel restrictions, organized networks repurposed these facilities to employ recruits for the explicit purpose of defrauding people worldwide through cyber fraud.

Criminal organizations redeployed workers from the online gaming and gambling industry and forcibly recruited tens of thousands more to fill burgeoning 'scam compounds', as they are referred to locally.¹ Five years on, hundreds of thousands of victims remain trapped and exploited across Southeast Asia in such criminal compounds.

These victims are in turn forced to victimize others by perpetrating fraud against unsuspecting individuals. One common process begins with the spamming of innumerable phone numbers or social media accounts with messages aimed at eliciting a response. Recruits then cultivate false relationships with the few who respond, often on a false romantic premise. They persuade targets of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get rich from purported investment schemes, ultimately in order to drain victims of their savings. However, this is just one of many types of fraud being conducted at scam compounds.

Cyber scam operations represent the latest iteration of a well-established criminal ecosystem, blending sophisticated technology with organized criminal tactics to create a highly lucrative and adaptable industry. Criminal organizations have been able to rely on existing money laundering networks and a proliferation of both cryptocurrencies and virtual asset service providers to hide enormous profits from this activity.²

The activity generates tens of billions of dollars per year. By one estimate, the money made from cyber scams in the Mekong equates to 40% of the combined formal gross domestic product (GDP) of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.³ Combined with the forced labour of trafficked persons, these profit margins present clear threats to national economies, governance and international security.

Given such staggering illicit profits, it is no surprise that this illegal industry has expanded beyond the region. Scam centres staffed by forced labour have been identified in the United Arab Emirates,⁴ Montenegro,⁵ Peru⁶ and Namibia,⁷ among other locations.

While such operations have grown substantially since the pandemic, online scams and fraud have been a significant problem in Southeast Asia for more than a decade.⁸ The roots of the industry can

be traced to Chinese-speaking communities located across Asia, and the phenomenon remains driven in large part (albeit not exclusively) by Chinese-speaking criminal actors, some of whom relocated to Southeast Asia after a crackdown by China on domestic casinos in the 2000s.⁹

Since 2021, there has been a growing body of research documenting various aspects of the cyber scam crisis in Southeast Asia, including on recruitment methods, dual victimization (i.e., both those exploited for forced criminality and those targeted by scams), criminal networks and the global reach of the phenomenon.¹⁰ Journalists – many of whom are referenced in this report – have provided some of the most detailed accounts of conditions inside scam compounds.¹¹

These illicit facilities are spread throughout Southeast Asia in capital cities, small towns and (both genuine and self-proclaimed) special economic zones (SEZs). They often share similar blueprints and are occupied by multiple scam operations.

This report contributes to existing literature by examining the criminal economy surrounding these cyber scam operations. It discusses the criminal actors who profit and provides insights into the characteristics of cyber scam compounds, the typology of scams and the profiles of victims targeted.

Four detailed case studies – zeroing in on scam compounds in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines – further explore the relationships between perpetrators, collaborators and victims, as well as provide additional insights into the harms caused by cyber scam operations.

Holistic responses that break down barriers and enhance cooperation and coordination among all stakeholders are urgently needed to address this phenomenon. This report concludes by providing



FIGURE 1 Southeast Asia, showing the focus countries of this study: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines.

recommendations that could be pursued by key actors in national governments, the international community and civil society actors who seek to engineer positive change. These recommendations include, among others, the need to raise more awareness of the multi-faceted harms of cyber scams, close regional loopholes and build resilience in affected communities.

The report was drafted in the second half of 2024 and its key findings have since been presented to government, civil society and private sector actors to build awareness, engagement and action on the topic.

Methodology

This report is based on multi-method research conducted in the first six months of 2024 by a team of 14 researchers and civil society partners with significant experience investigating organized crime and corruption in Southeast Asia. Researchers conducted field visits and in-person interviews with villagers, local government officials, investigative journalists, people who worked for money laundering operations and scam centres and civil society organizations that operate in affected areas. The report also draws on a literature review of secondary sources, including analysis of over 350 articles, blogs and media reports in English and local languages. Social media analysis provided insight into the locations and conditions of scam compounds and communication patterns among criminal actors. The GI-TOC validated the information through additional semi-structured interviews, open-source research and source triangulation, and then synthesized and analyzed the data for this report.

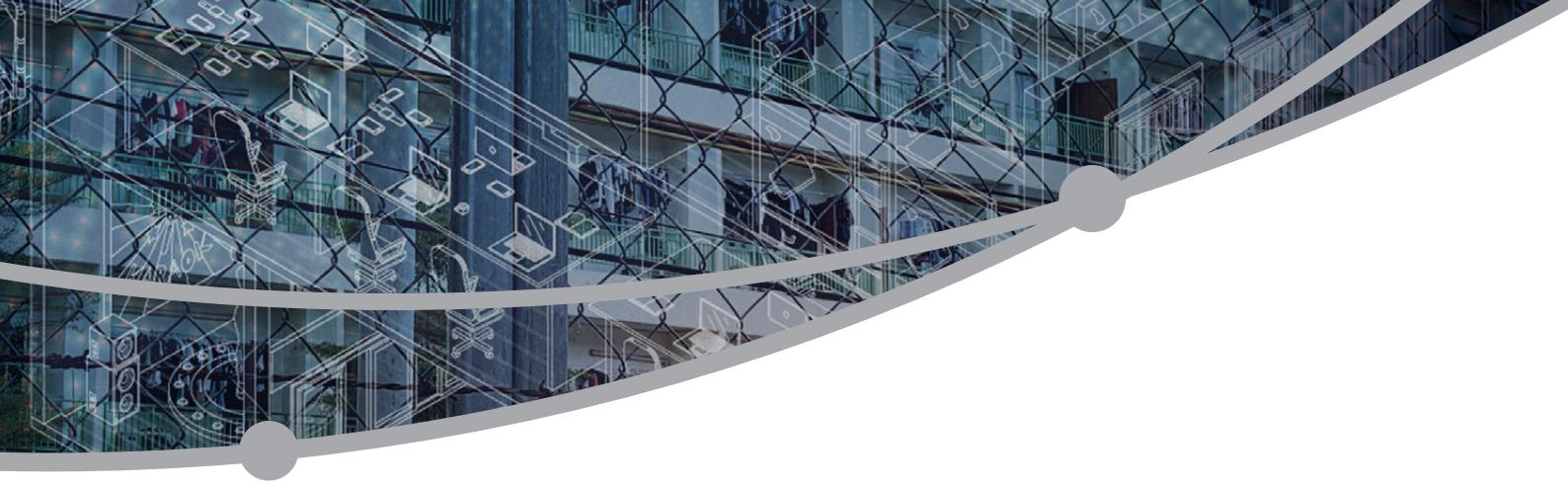
Initial drafts of this report were reviewed by an external expert working on cyber scam operations in Southeast Asia as well as technical experts working for the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking programme and the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. The preliminary findings were also presented at a regional multi-stakeholder expert group meeting co-organized by the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking programme and the GI-TOC in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2024. This meeting served as an opportunity to further refine the research findings.

Key findings

- The cyber scam industry appears to be continuously changing, highly adaptable and mobile. Despite crackdowns in numerous locations, compounds often close only temporarily, relocate to less scrutinized or smaller facilities, or switch jurisdictions.
- Cyber scam operators create two types of victims by defrauding people through online scams and exploiting their (often forced) recruits. The latter type challenges existing perceptions of and distinctions between victims and perpetrators.
- Local elites – from elected officials and influential business owners to armed group leaders – play a significant role in driving and facilitating cyber scams. These include ‘role shifters’, who can be defined as individuals who simultaneously hold positions in government, business and criminal networks or shift between those roles. They influence both the criminal ecosystem and the policy responses to it.
- Cyber scam operations exemplify a convergence of various forms of transnational organized crime on a large scale. Trafficking in persons, financial fraud, cybercrime, corruption and money laundering – the latter also channeled through cryptocurrencies – are best understood as facets of a single issue

rather than distinct categories. This dovetailing of criminal activities has been accelerated by technological advances, blurred lines between criminal groups and private sector entities, corruption and the weak rule of law.

- It is increasingly clear that the scale and repercussions were previously vastly underestimated by local and international stakeholders working on the phenomenon. The multi-faceted impact of the cyber scam industry extends well beyond the financial harm caused to victims. It threatens the rule of law, peace, security, sustainable development, freedom and human rights, while also undermining the economy and environment. While these harms are most acute in Southeast Asia, the knock-on effects are global.



BASIC PARAMETERS

The success of cyber scam operations across Southeast Asia depends on a combination of the actors involved, the spaces they occupy and the power structures that uphold them. From remote border regions to urban centres, these hubs of exploitation are based in hotels, casinos and purpose-built compounds.

Cyber scam operations take place at the intersection of the criminal underworld and the upperworld of business and politics. Many of these operations are able to hide behind a façade of business that makes them appear legitimate and benefit from an ecosystem of corruption. As the scam industry evolves, it adapts to law enforcement efforts by relocating operations and diversifying scams and fraud to maximize profits.

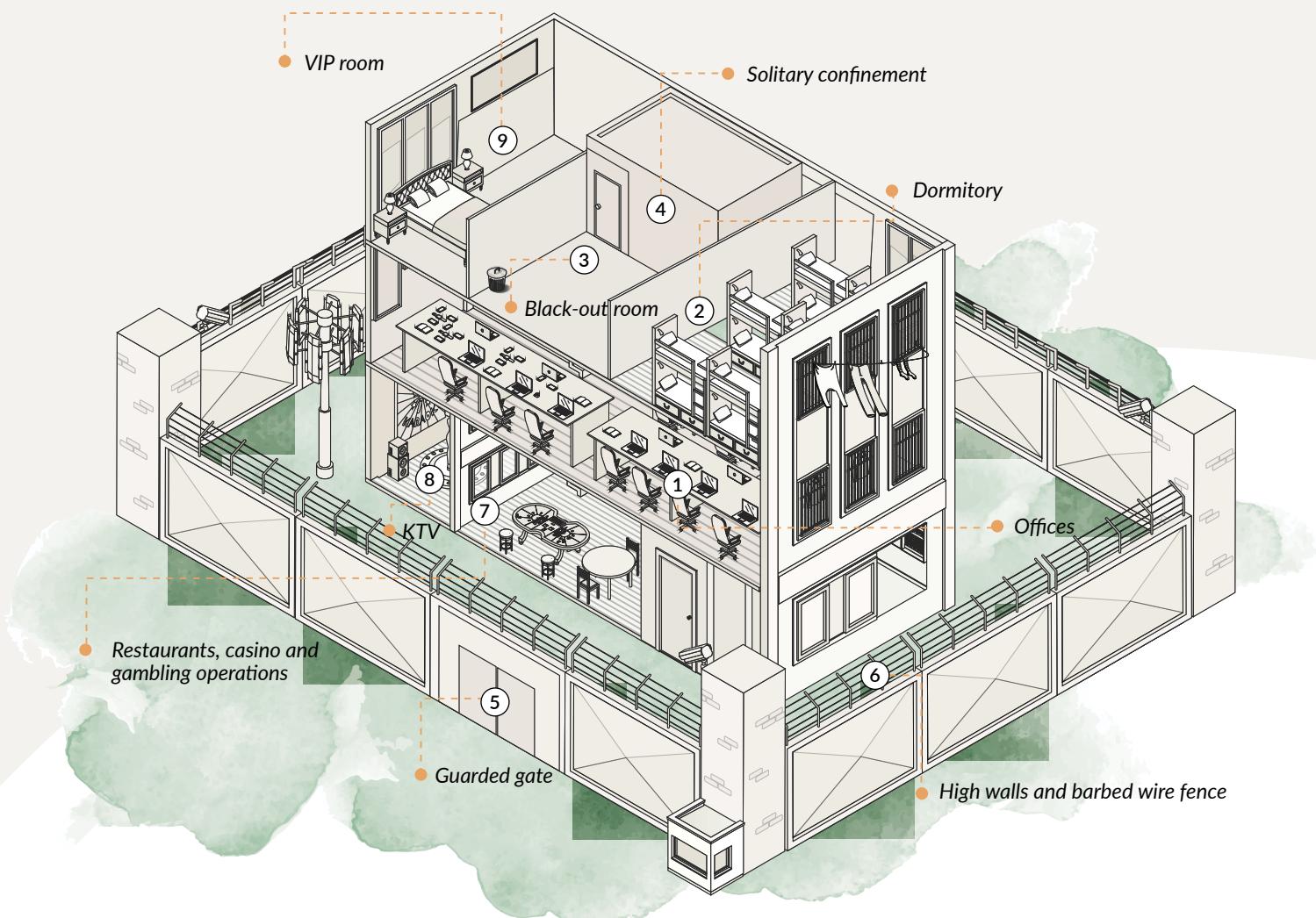
What is a scam compound?

Cyber scam operations in Southeast Asia are fluid and take on different shapes depending on the space available in different contexts. Some fill only an apartment; others fill large, multi-storey buildings in walled compounds or entire hotels.

Scam compounds generally appear to cluster in areas where state control is limited or has been co-opted by criminal groups,¹² including border areas where law enforcement and border officials are unable or unwilling to enforce the law.¹³ These areas, which had previously also drawn alleged illegal gambling operations,¹⁴ have attracted scam operations using forced criminality for a number of reasons, including their proximity to human trafficking routes and the ease of relocating compounds across borders amid government crackdowns.¹⁵ While these are often remote areas, they still have access to electricity and the internet.¹⁶ In addition, scam compounds can be found in bigger towns and cities, where – in most cases – they enjoy protection from local elites and security forces, or exploit low trust between communities and authorities.¹⁷

As can be observed in the schematic below, buildings hosting scam compounds across Southeast Asia often follow a similar blueprint. Many are based in re-purposed hotels, casinos, villas and apartment complexes.¹⁸ In the Philippines, scam operations were discovered in the offices of licensed offshore casinos.¹⁹ In Myanmar, some compounds near the Thai border are purpose-built with rows of block dormitories.²⁰ In some of these locations, multiple scam operations operate in a single location or in close proximity.

SCHEMATIC OF A SCAM COMPOUND



- ① **Offices** – Large offices filled with rows of computers and cell phones serve as the primary scamming operation centres.
- ② **Dormitory** – People who conduct scams sleep in dormitories with bunk beds.
- ③ **Black-out room** – People who conduct scams but resist orders, try to escape or underperform are beaten or tortured in rooms with blacked-out windows.
- ④ **Solitary confinement** – Solitary confinement rooms are also used for punishment.
- ⑤ **Guarded gate** – Compound entrances are usually heavily monitored by armed security personnel or military officers, CCTV systems and guard dogs.
- ⑥ **High walls and barbed wire fence** – Some compounds are surrounded by tall walls topped with barbed wire fencing to prevent workers from escaping.
- ⑦ **Restaurants, casino and gambling operations** – Some scam compounds are located inside or adjacent to casinos. Others include gambling halls and restaurants where people who conduct scams can spend their wages.
- ⑧ **KTV** – Karaoke rooms within the compound provide access to entertainment, drugs, alcohol and sex workers.
- ⑨ **VIP room** – Higher-level criminals who reside at the scam compound have access to luxury suites or condos.

NOTE: This graphic is based on the testimonies of people who have worked in scam compounds and visits by GI-TOC researchers to active and abandoned scam compounds across the region. The representation is a schematic and may not accurately reflect all compounds in the area.



A shuttered cyber scam compound in Sihanoukville where Cambodian authorities said they had recovered evidence of human trafficking, kidnapping and torture during raids in 2022. © Cindy Liu/Reuters

Compounds feature extensive security measures – including gates, guard stations with private security and large dogs, window bars, inward facing closed circuit television cameras and barbed wire fences.²¹ While these measures ostensibly keep unwanted guests out, their primary purpose is to keep workers inside and prevent them from escaping.

Scam compounds are often self-contained, housing all necessary facilities within individual buildings or inside compound walls. Workers are usually restricted to tall dormitory-style buildings where they sleep in crowded rooms lined with bunk beds. Higher-ranking employees share these spaces in some cases, allowing for constant surveillance of lower-ranking people who are forced to perpetrate the scams.²² Some dormitories have balconies where workers dry their laundry. There have been suicide attempts from these balconies, some of which were successful.²³ Bars on windows or balconies suggest attempts to prevent suicide as well as escape.

In stark contrast to the cramped conditions for workers, compound managers and those supervising scam operations have been reported to reside in master suites on the top floors of these buildings²⁴ or in luxury condos within or near the compound.²⁵

Work areas consist of rows of computers where people are forced to conduct a variety of online scams for 12 hours or more per day. Sometimes work hours are at night to align with scam targets' schedules. For people who fail to meet performance targets, break rules or resist the managers, black-out rooms and isolation cells serve as areas for punishment and torture.²⁶

Larger compounds house on-site businesses where workers can spend wages earned from perpetrating scams. These include karaoke bars and drug bars, restaurants, barber shops and medical centres.²⁷ These amenities, however, often reinforce the cycle of exploitation rather than support workers. For example, they are reported to significantly overcharge workers for medical care: a single painkiller can cost US\$50.²⁸ In addition, massage spas, gambling rooms and VIP karaoke bars reportedly exist for senior managers, where they gather to drink, sing and socialize in private rooms.²⁹

One key feature of the scam industry is its mobility; scam operations relocate as authorities clamp down in one location, resulting in scam compounds mushrooming in another location.³⁰ People who have worked in scam compounds report a certain 'life cycle of operations' where workers operate for

multiple months after which they are moved or sold to different compounds. For example, this includes crossing through Thailand in transit between the Golden Triangle SEZ, Cambodia and Myanmar.³¹ Sometimes these are hurried night-time relocations involving several vehicle changes³² and border crossings through formal checkpoints and unmonitored crossings.³³ Alternatively, some scam operations stay in place or temporarily close in response to law enforcement crackdowns. In several cases, these acts of enforcement appear to be performative, rather than effective efforts aimed at eliminating scam centres.³⁴ This may explain why scam operations return after the dust has settled.³⁵

The list of known scam compound locations in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines is long and continuously changing. ‘You can really see how many of these scam operations are dispersing,’ noted one cyber scam expert covering Myanmar. ‘They are not limited to border areas anymore but can be found across the country, even in Mandalay and Yangon.’³⁶ Similarly, recent on-the-ground reports and satellite imagery indicate that scam compounds are being built or expanded in many new sites in Cambodia and Laos.³⁷ In the Philippines, observers say operations are fragmenting into smaller units based out of nondescript buildings to disguise their activities³⁸ after the federal ban on licensed Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs) that took effect at the end of 2024.³⁹ Operations also frequently move equipment and labour to new sites within or between countries, sometimes selling workers to other groups.⁴⁰

The role of special economic zones

There has been much reporting on scam operations in SEZs. However, while scam operations exist in legally designated SEZs, there does not appear to be a causal link between the two and there are only a limited number of SEZs where scam operations have been confirmed. Reporting seems to be conflated as many cyber scam compounds are in self-declared SEZs or other types of economic zones.

SEZs are designed to stimulate trade, attract investment and create jobs through deregulation, tax incentives, trade benefits and other investment privileges.⁴¹ However, lax regulatory oversight has also facilitated organized criminal activities by creating space to generate and launder illicit proceeds. As a result, some SEZs are hubs for illicit activities, including counterfeit goods manufacturing, drug (and drug precursor) trafficking, flora and fauna trafficking, tax evasion, gambling and money laundering.

For example, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, several SEZs in the region stand out as enablers of corruption. This report and various media articles raise concerns about MDS Thmorda SEZ in Cambodia, the Golden Triangle SEZ in Laos and Clark Freeport SEZ in the Philippines,⁴² among others.⁴³ These locations are reported to host various criminal activities, such as drug⁴⁴ and wildlife trafficking,⁴⁵ illegal casinos and cyber scams.⁴⁶

In addition, the presence of casinos and online gambling companies in SEZs is widely understood to increase the risk of criminal activity. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that there were approximately 340 licensed and unlicensed casinos in 2021 across Southeast Asian SEZs,⁴⁷ some of which were used for money laundering, illegal gambling and, more recently, cyber scams involving forced criminality.⁴⁸ The involvement of Chinese-owned developers, management and security at these sites may also contribute to this risk.⁴⁹ ■

Hitching a ride on the BRI?



Scam compounds have been discovered in facilities owned by Chinese developers, some of whom claim to be affiliated with China's Belt and Road Initiative. © Brent Lewin/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Individuals (and groups) linked to the cyber scam industry have often (falsely) portrayed their activities across Southeast Asia as being linked to the development of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a flagship programme promoting Chinese influence on overseas trade in tandem with the development of Chinese funded transport and other infrastructure.⁵⁰

Given that the Chinese government does not officially publish a list of BRI projects, it seems that some investors have taken advantage of this situation to claim their developments are BRI-linked, yet their affiliation remains ambiguous. For example, Wan Kuok-koi ('Broken Tooth'), who was previously linked to scam compounds in Myanmar, has reportedly characterized his alleged criminal enterprises as being part of the BRI.⁵¹ The developers of Yatai New City in Myanmar initially described it as a BRI project⁵² and a Chinese state-owned enterprise was one of the major contractors involved in building the city.⁵³ However, Yatai later denied its affiliation with the BRI after the Chinese embassy claimed it was entirely a third-party investment. It denied any involvement with 'illegal casinos' and urged that 'all companies within our area abide by Myanmar laws and regulations'.⁵⁴

The Dara Sakor Seashore Resort in Cambodia was reportedly described as the largest BRI-affiliated project in the region by its developer, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, but its status is unclear.⁵⁵ The Cambodian government-aligned *Khmer Times* reported that although the Dara Sakor project 'pre-dates the BRI by five years, it is aligned with the BRI's core values'.⁵⁶ In 2022, scam workers were released from buildings adjacent to the LongBay Casino Hotel complex within the Dara Sakor concession.⁵⁷ The owners of LongBay are now sanctioned by the United Kingdom for facilitating or obtaining benefit from people 'held in servitude or required to perform forced or compulsory labour'.⁵⁸ The owners of the Dara Sakor concession have also been sanctioned by the United States.⁵⁹

A typology of scams

There are many types of online scams perpetrated across the region; the principal ones are summarized below.

- Romance and investment scams (also called pig-butchering scams): 'Pig-butchering', which originates from the Chinese phrase '杀猪盘' (shā zhū pán),⁶⁰ aims to build trust with targets and lure them into thinking that they are embarking on romantic relationships, ultimately in order to extract money fraudulently for non-existent investment schemes.⁶¹

- Impersonation scams: Scammers pose as trusted entities (such as police⁶² or company customer service representatives⁶³) to convince victims to divulge sensitive information or transfer funds.
- E-commerce scams: These involve creating fake online stores or listings on legitimate platforms, offering non-existent or counterfeit goods to deceive buyers and steal money or personal data.⁶⁴
- Crypto Ponzi schemes: An investment fraud that purports to offer high profits with little or no risk. Like traditional Ponzi schemes, this involves paying 'returns' to existing investors using funds contributed by new investors. These schemes collapse when new investments slow down.⁶⁵
- Online extortion: Blackmailing of targets with embarrassing or incriminating information, often with a deceptive sexual element (which is called sextortion). For example, perpetrators acquire sexually explicit images or videos of victims through 'nude chats' that are recorded without the consent of the victim.⁶⁶ Other variations use similar tactics to acquire personal data from victims.⁶⁷
- Other cyber-enabled crimes: These encompass a range of cyber-attacks, including phishing and malware attacks. Phishing is orchestrated through deceptive emails, websites or text messages that appear to be from reputable sources to trick victims into providing sensitive information such as passwords, credit card information or financial account details. Malware attacks involve malicious software that infiltrates devices or networks, usually to steal data, spy on users or extort money. This can involve use of viruses, ransomware, spyware and QR codes that trigger an automatic download of malware.⁶⁸

Such schemes are quickly evolving as the criminal industry is experimenting with new types of scams. They often involve cryptocurrencies, particularly stablecoins, which is a type of cryptocurrency pegged to a stable asset such as the US dollar.⁶⁹

It is worth noting that while scams function differently from the victim's perspective, it appears that they frequently operate out of the same types of compounds. People forced to conduct these scams cast a wide net with text messages and chats, striking up conversations with anyone who responds. The similarity of romance investments scams conducted across different scam compounds is often because standardized manuals are used, which set out social engineering techniques to groom targets. These manuals have been discovered in raided compounds and are readily available online.⁷⁰

A complete and accurate estimate of the value of funds stolen through these scams remains elusive. While blockchain analysis firms, think tanks and governments have released estimates for the financial impact of scams, these numbers are not comparable. They clearly differ in how they classify scams, which type of scam they analyze, whether these scams are conducted globally or are region-specific, the type of assets included in the estimates and calculation methods.

For instance, in 2024, cryptocurrency scams received at least US\$9.9 billion on-chain according to Chainalysis (down from over US\$10 billion in 2023).⁷¹ US officials reported its citizens lost at least US\$4.57 billion in assets from investment scams and US\$652.5 million from 'romance/confidence' scams in 2023;⁷² and Australia reported AUD1.57 billion (US\$1.1 billion) was defrauded by romance and investment scams in 2023.⁷³ The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) estimated global 'illegal and unregulated online gambling and sophisticated scamming operations' generated US\$64 billion in 2023.⁷⁴ Within that figure, USIP estimates 'criminal syndicates' in Mekong countries were responsible for US\$43.8 billion.⁷⁵

Comparability issues notwithstanding, these estimates confirm that scam operations are extremely profitable. Additionally, useful trends are evident in individual analyses conducted consistently over a span of several years. For example, Chainalysis found that crypto revenues from romance scams increased 85-fold between 2020 and 2023.⁷⁶

Nonetheless, greater comparability in research methodologies and more comprehensive data are both clearly needed to provide better insight into the financial flows associated with cyber scams.⁷⁷

Scam victims

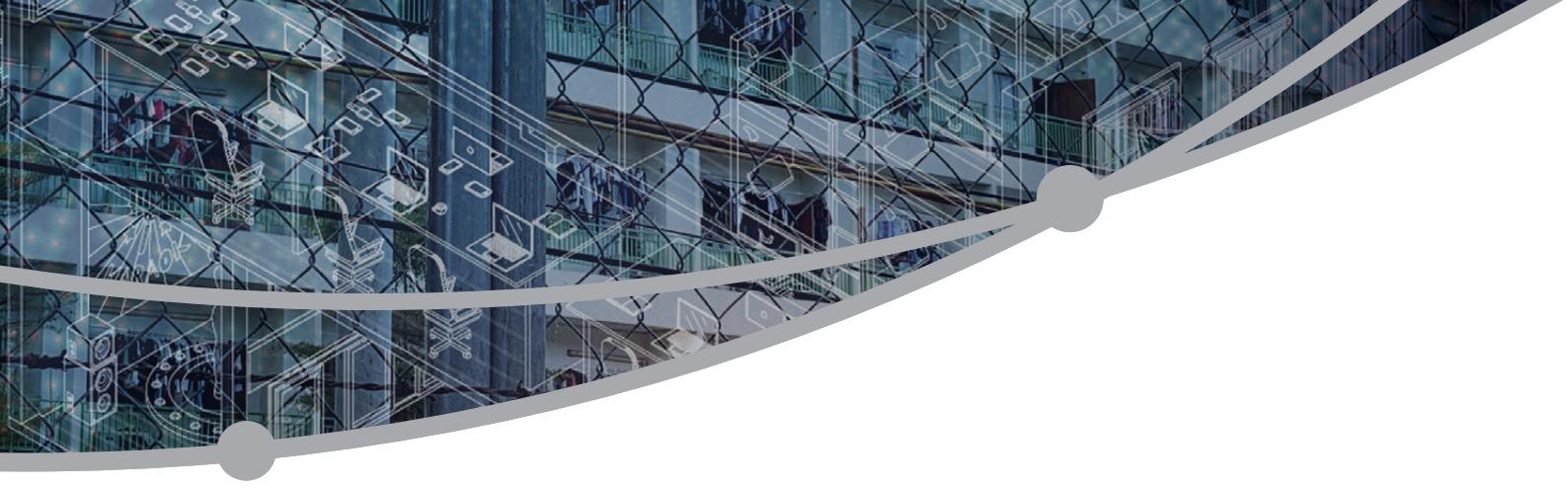
Scam targets are diverse and globally dispersed. The locations of chosen victims often correlate with the languages spoken by scam workers. In some cases, however, scammers rely on language translation software and generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots to broaden their reach.⁷⁸ Scammers are often instructed to identify targets that appear financially stable, and they often pose as women on mainstream social media platforms to attract middle-aged or older male victims.⁷⁹ Other operations specifically target the elderly, LGBTQI+ people and women.⁸⁰

Many reported victims are based in Australia, Canada, China, Europe, India and the US.⁸¹ Some rescued scam labourers have reported that they were specifically told not to target Asians. However, people in many countries across the region – notably Thailand,⁸² Vietnam,⁸³ Singapore⁸⁴ and Indonesia⁸⁵ – are frequently targeted by scams.⁸⁶

Scam operations assess the likelihood of targets taking the bait. They often focus on vulnerable individuals, such as those experiencing difficult life changes, like divorce or the death of a family member. Those in financial trouble are reported to be more likely to fall for scams that promise quick money, like Ponzi schemes and other fake investments. Cryptocurrency scams are also common because many people do not understand the risks and lack digital security knowledge, making them easier targets.⁸⁷

Yet anyone can fall victim to online scams,⁸⁸ even tech-savvy individuals with investment experience, as was the case with a bank CEO in the US.⁸⁹ People with experience using online brokerage accounts are not immune because scammers often use legitimate apps to house illegitimate brokerage services.⁹⁰

Furthermore, the scammers employ sophisticated psychological manipulation and social engineering techniques to control victims and prevent them from noticing red flags. For example, they foster emotional dependency, generate a sense of urgency to pressure victims to invest quickly and exploit a human tendency to double down on investments despite losses (the sunk cost fallacy) by encouraging them to take out loans to ‘invest’ more, even after surrendering their entire life savings.⁹¹



KEY PLAYERS

Across Southeast Asia, cyber scam operations exploit and thrive in a well-established criminal ecosystem already comprising many different illicit markets and actors. According to the GI-TOC's 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, the region hosts diverse criminal actors, including criminal networks, state-embedded actors and foreign criminal groups.⁹² Cyber scam operations are run and facilitated by a variety of actors who operate across the region and beyond.

Inside scam compounds, cyber scams involve numerous actors, ranging from organized criminal groups to recruitment networks and individuals forced to conduct the scams. The criminal networks are often fragmented with smaller groups operating alongside larger criminal organizations. Researchers have often uncovered multiple scam operations and managers operating in close proximity in major scam locations.

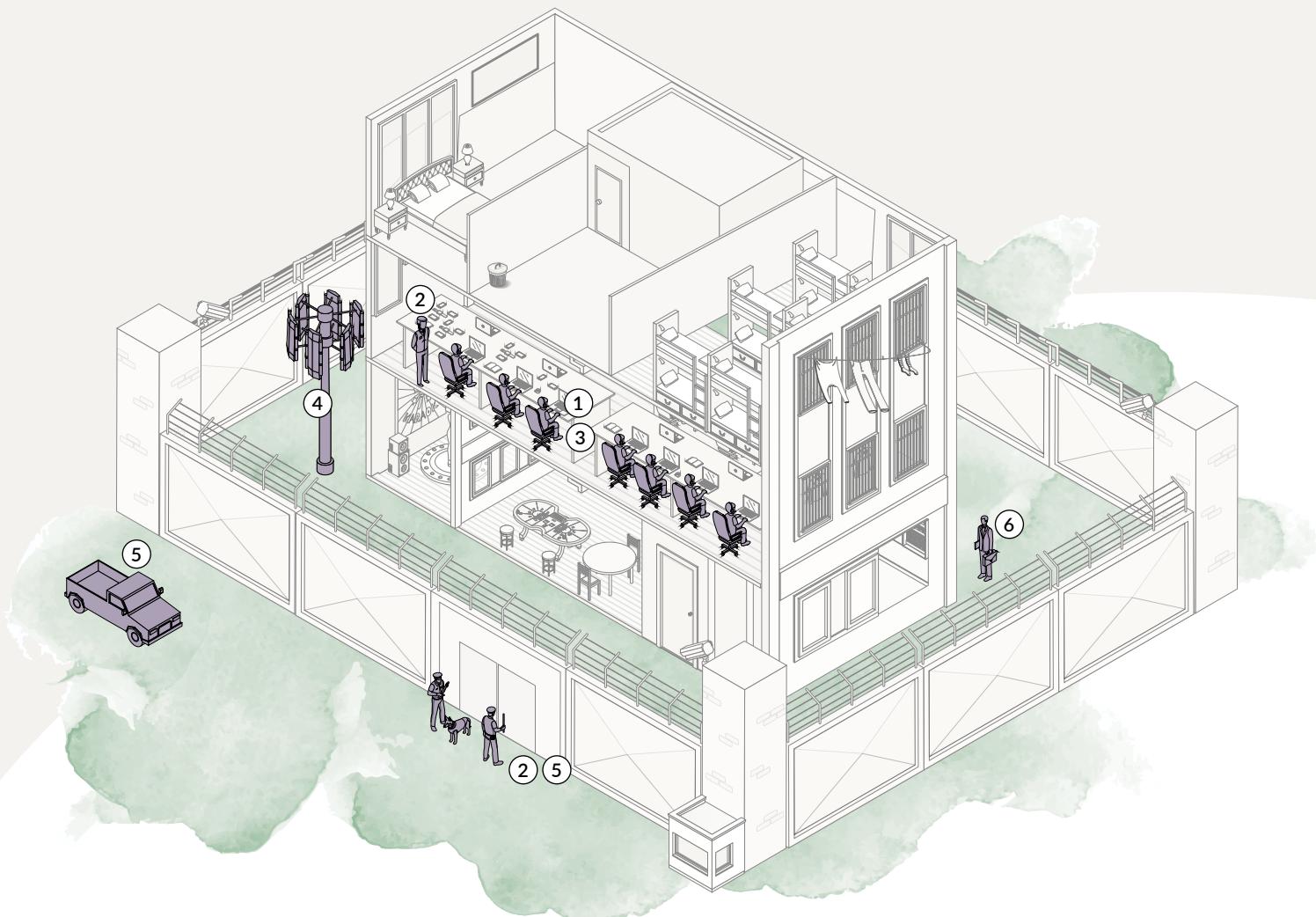
People who conduct scams

During the pandemic, high unemployment in some countries led people to search for work online; some accepted fake job offers that landed them in scam compounds.⁹³ Individuals from all around the world, of different age groups and social backgrounds, are recruited by traffickers for scam operations. Although initially Asian men in their twenties and thirties were prime targets, all demographics are currently at risk, especially those experiencing financial distress, discrimination and displacement from natural disasters, climate change and conflict. For instance, recruiters operating from within Yangon, Myawaddy and the Golden Triangle SEZ reportedly target Myanmar nationals fleeing conflict or seeking work.⁹⁴ Additionally, there have been reports of pregnant women and teenagers being forced into the industry.⁹⁵

Citizens from Myanmar, Laos and the Philippines are trafficked abroad, while others work in compounds in their home countries alongside foreigners. Workers in Cambodia's scam compounds are primarily foreign.⁹⁶ In total, it is estimated that people from more than 66 countries have been trafficked to Southeast Asia's scam compounds.⁹⁷

Reports from international organizations suggest significant numbers of individuals are involved in scam operations across Southeast Asia. In 2023, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated there to be at least 100 000 people in Myanmar's scam compounds and 120 000 in Cambodia.⁹⁸ By 2024, USIP estimated 500 000 people to be allegedly forcibly involved in scam operations across Southeast Asia.⁹⁹ While regional governments have acknowledged these operations, they have disputed such estimates without offering comprehensive alternative data.¹⁰⁰ In response to international reporting, for example, Cambodia's Ministry of Interior issued a statement characterizing such claims as an 'attempt to exaggerate the reality, demonstrating their ulterior motives, which undermine the integrity of Cambodia on the international stage' and noting that 'most of the complaints of the concerned parties derived from work disputes, contracts, and conditions as excuses to return to their home country'.¹⁰¹

CRIMINAL ACTORS AT SCAM COMPOUND LEVEL



- ① **People who conduct scams** sometimes do so willingly and sometimes under duress. Forced labour is often the result of trafficking in persons, while willing labour is provided by low-level criminals. Some enter willingly but are later unable to leave or are trafficked but decide to stay as they are able to make a profit. These workers do the 'grunt work' in cyber scam operations, notably by identifying, targeting, chatting with and luring victims. Some operatives are employed as translators.
- ② **Scam operations managers** are primarily actors within Chinese-speaking criminal networks running the day-to-day operations, including by providing security for a compound. There are also reports of local criminal networks as well as networks from South Korea, Japan and other Southeast Asian countries who often work in collaboration with Chinese-speaking criminal networks.
- ③ **Recruiters and traffickers** consist of multiple actors, including brokers, smugglers and traffickers spanning multiple countries. Recruiters sometimes operate from trafficking victims' countries of origin, and some function like legitimate job agencies, deceiving job seekers with fake jobs and then trafficking them to compounds. Some are reportedly based at compounds as 'human resources' staff or as scam workers who recruit friends and acquaintances.
- ④ **IT personnel** encompass individuals and companies in the tech sector and money laundering networks involved in funnelling the proceeds of crime, often through cryptocurrency transactions. They provide crucial services to criminal groups. Some do not necessarily consider themselves part of a criminal group.
- ⑤ **Corrupt officials** include police, military or border guards and other government officials. They not only facilitate workers' journeys to scam compounds, but also provide protection from raids or physical security on-site. They have also been reported to facilitate the movement of scam operatives between compounds.
- ⑥ **Role shifters** are business owners, politicians and crime bosses who hold multiple roles (and who sometimes shift between those roles). Individuals may be more closely aligned with one profile than others, but their defining feature is their ability to switch. They have significant influence over investments, law-making and law enforcement processes and wield their influence to shape the criminal economy of the region.

Precise estimates of people who conduct scams remain challenging to establish for several reasons. Victim identification procedures vary across jurisdictions,¹⁰² and law enforcement sometimes reportedly classify potential trafficking cases as immigration offences or labour disputes.¹⁰³ Additionally, the clandestine nature of these operations impedes consistent data collection and verification.

Evidence gathered from survivors, researchers and satellite imagery suggests the number and size of scam compounds – and therefore likely the scale of trafficking in persons – is significant.¹⁰⁴ Even limited law enforcement data confirms a large number of people continue to work in scam compounds. Myanmar authorities reportedly transferred 31 000 people allegedly involved in cyber scams to Chinese authorities during a crackdown on cyber scams in Myanmar along the Chinese border in November 2023.¹⁰⁵ In the Golden Triangle SEZ, authorities reportedly detained and deported 771 people conducting ‘tele fraud’ within several days in August 2024; at least 548 Indian nationals were among those deported in 2024.¹⁰⁶ Cambodian authorities detained around 700 foreign workers (primarily Chinese) at just two resorts in Preah Sihanouk province in March 2024 for their alleged involvement in illegal gambling and scam operations.¹⁰⁷ Between August and December 2024, Chinese law enforcement – and counterparts in Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam – reportedly detained and deported more than 70 000 suspects involved primarily in ‘telecom fraud’ across the region.¹⁰⁸

Scam operation managers

Many scam operations are run by Chinese-speaking criminal networks. As a dominant actor, these groups have so far received the most attention in international and local reporting.¹⁰⁹ However, criminal groups originating from elsewhere in Asia – notably of Japanese, Vietnamese, Malaysian and South Korean origin – have been identified in Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines and Myanmar.¹¹⁰

According to a Japanese police attaché based in the region, the Japanese groups include Yakuza-affiliates and other organized crime groups that are more ‘loosely networked’ and operate alone, or in smaller, fractured units. South Korean and Japanese nationals arrested for alleged scam and telecom fraud in several countries include both criminal fugitives and people recruited online deceptively and forced to scam.¹¹¹ Most of the Japanese and South Korean criminal groups appear to be renting space in larger compounds or casinos owned by powerful local developers.¹¹²

There have also been reports of scam operations taking place in Japan,¹¹³ indicating the further spread of the phenomenon, as criminal networks put expertise gained in Southeast Asia into practice at home. As cyber scam operations continue to spread across the region and beyond, it is likely that copycats will enter the market (or have already done so).

Chinese-speaking criminal networks collaborate with local criminal networks in many locations. For example, while Chinese-speaking actors often provide security, including through Chinese private security companies,¹¹⁴ local armed groups or police supplement these efforts with their own forces.¹¹⁵ A former worker at a scam compound in Shwe Kokko, Myanmar, explained that the operation’s leader was always accompanied by two Chinese-speaking bodyguards, four Myanmar security guards and a German Shepherd dog.¹¹⁶ The United Wa State Army, a Myanmar ethnic armed organization, Laos national police and Chinese security have previously been reported to provide security in the Golden Triangle SEZ.¹¹⁷ It also appears that Chinese-speaking criminal networks have de facto authority over some areas with scam operations. An example is Laukkai, Myanmar, where prior to the takeover by an ethnic armed organization in 2024,¹¹⁸ the national military and police reportedly were unable to exert authority over the illegal casino and scam operations, or were unwilling to do so because their non-intervention allegedly benefited them financially.¹¹⁹

Chinese scam operatives during a police raid on a suspected scam compound in Batam City, Indonesia in August 2023. Scam operations are reported to deceptively recruit young, tech-savvy individuals to work for them.

© STR/AFP via Getty Images



The relationships between criminal networks requires further investigation. Despite the proximity of many scam operations and managers within the same buildings and/or cities, not much is yet known about competition – or indeed cooperation – between the criminal actors and networks that run the compounds. So far, it appears that this illegal market has provided enough low hanging fruit for diverse criminal groups to operate, but it is unclear whether this will continue if or when the market consolidates.

Furthermore, high-level managers or owners above the day-to-day management of compounds are based regionally. Several of the 10 people arrested in Singapore in 2023 and later convicted as part of a S\$3 billion (US\$2.2 billion) money laundering case had ties to online gambling and telecommunication scams in the Philippines and Cambodia.¹²⁰ While originally from China, they held a variety of passports acquired before taking up residence in Singapore, and owned numerous businesses used as fronts to launder funds.¹²¹ Two of those convicted were reportedly shareholders in the company that built the Baofu compound in Bamban, the Philippines, which was later found to house scam operations (and constitutes one of our case studies).¹²²

Recruiters and traffickers

Scam operatives report being recruited online through professional-looking job advertisements posted to social media.¹²³ They are interviewed and receive job offers in sales, marketing and customer service, only to realize later that the job is to perpetrate scams.¹²⁴ As the industry evolves and becomes more sophisticated in its use of technology, the UNODC has reported an increasing demand for workers skilled in data science, search engine optimization and digital marketing.¹²⁵ This suggests that some job descriptions used to recruit these skilled workers may align with the actual roles; however, they may still deceive the recruits about the location and criminality of the employer.

Still others are lured to scam compounds by friends, relatives or acquaintances who are also scammers, but who recruit others, including in exchange for their own freedom.¹²⁶ For example, between May and August 2022, a 23-year-old individual fell victim to a supposed friend's offer of a job fixing air conditioners in Thailand; instead, he was forced to operate in a scam compound in Laos with no option of leaving until his one-year contract was completed. He was only released after his family

paid a ransom of the equivalent of US\$12 457.¹²⁷ Similarly, a young man from Kachin State, Myanmar was invited to work in Laukkai, Myanmar where he reluctantly accepted a job at a cyber scam operation only to realize that his friend had benefited from the arrangement.¹²⁸

The structure of recruiting and trafficking networks often remains unclear, although they seem to vary depending on the country of origin and involve multiple actors such as recruiters, brokers, smugglers and traffickers.¹²⁹ Some recruiters are reportedly based in scam compounds, earning commission for each person they recruit,¹³⁰ while others work in the same countries as their victims.¹³¹ Brokers also play a key role in re-selling people between compounds. *Frontier Myanmar*, a local online magazine, reports that ‘they will sell the workers to another broker if the company already has more workers than it needs ... the workers do not know they are being sold’.¹³²

Some reports indicate that recruitment networks or brokers even collaborate with legitimate job agencies. For example, individuals who previously sought legal employment through agencies in Dubai were later deceived into accepting job offers at cyber scam operations in Southeast Asia.¹³³ According to Humanity Research Consultancy, a social enterprise researching the topic, it appears that Dubai-based agencies were implicated in this scheme, to the point where some received payments directly from criminal networks.¹³⁴

Recruitment commissions can be substantial. For example, a criminal group allegedly earned US\$1.67 million for trafficking 82 workers via Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport to Cambodia.¹³⁵

Some traffickers are recruited online by adverts like those used to recruit scam operatives: recruiters are tasked with ‘appeasing’ the ‘clients’ (referring to trafficking victims) throughout the journey until they reach the scam compounds. Recruiters reportedly instruct clients to turn off their mobile phones during the trip, but there appears to be no requirement to confiscate them. A post on China Youth Online reported that trafficking three victims to compounds yields a bonus of RMB16 666 (US\$2 291), for six victims a bonus of RMB18 888 (US\$2 596) and for trafficking 23 victims a bonus of RMB99 999 (US\$13 746). Additionally, introducing new intermediaries to the team can also result in bonuses ranging from RMB8 888 to RMB88 888 (US\$1 246 to US\$12 462).¹³⁶

More research is needed to better understand the relationship and collaboration between the criminal scam operations and compound managers in Southeast Asia and recruitment networks or local trafficking in persons networks in countries of origin.¹³⁷

IT personnel

IT professionals and people involved in online money laundering are key facilitators, with some working as freelancers, for companies or as staff directly embedded in scam operations. Many can also be described as (criminal) opportunists or crime-as-a-service providers that offer IT support, websites and apps used in scams (for instance, fake versions of legitimate investment platforms),¹³⁸ as well as money laundering services.¹³⁹

Some have backgrounds in the region’s financial and technology industries, which have hosted numerous start-ups in fintech, especially cryptocurrency companies.¹⁴⁰ While this industry has seen tremendous growth and innovation, some aspects appear to have been co-opted or directly developed in the interests of criminal actors, especially for fraud and money laundering.¹⁴¹

Money laundering networks include professional money laundering ‘gateway’ companies, high-risk virtual asset providers (such as currency exchangers, decentralized exchanges and crypto ‘mixers’) and mule account holders, who are tricked or intentionally sell their bank accounts to criminal groups.

Gateway companies

'Gateway companies' (also called 'Tongdao', 通道) are intermediaries at the centre of money laundering activities. Using public and private Telegram or other chat groups, they connect scam operations with the money launderers who transfer the stolen funds through networks of connected mule accounts (referred to as 'motorcades').¹⁴² Mule accounts exist in local and international banks.¹⁴³ Funds stolen from scam victims pass through mule accounts and out of those countries.¹⁴⁴



Huione Pay has an office on a major boulevard in the heart of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo: GI-TOC

Gateway companies operate much like legitimate businesses, complete with departments, standard operating procedures and risk management strategies.¹⁴⁵ They even mediate disputes between scam operations and money launderers, for instance, when a mule account holder steals funds they were supposed to launder.¹⁴⁶

One example appears to be Huione Pay (汇旺APP), a company owned by the conglomerate Huione Group, which describes itself as 'Alipay in Cambodia'. Huione Pay and other vendors listed on an online marketplace owned by the conglomerate Huione Guarantee have reportedly facilitated between US\$70 billion-US\$89 billion in cryptocurrency transactions since 2021.¹⁴⁷ While it could not be confirmed whether all of these transactions were related to crime, two blockchain analytics firms traced some to scam operations, armed groups and members of the North Korea-affiliated hacking group Lazarus.¹⁴⁸ In March 2025, Huione Pay had reportedly been stripped of its banking licence by the National Bank of Cambodia but Huione then claimed that its payment operations did not require one. It also said media reports linking it to illicit activities were false.¹⁴⁹ In May 2025, the US Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network identified Huione Group as a financial institution of primary money laundering concern and a critical node for laundering proceeds from cyber scam operations. It proposed to sever its access to the US financial system.¹⁵⁰ Several days later, Huione Pay was observed taking down its signage in Phnom Penh, and Telegram banned thousands of accounts and usernames that had been linked to it.¹⁵¹ ■

While some IT personnel and money laundering professionals are unaware their products and services facilitate scam operations, others willingly participate. Interviews with employees at several gateway (money laundering) companies and currency exchangers revealed some knew their work catered to scams, while others did not perceive their work as being part of a criminal organization.¹⁵² Similarly, some of the nominal holders of accounts used in money laundering are people who have sold their accounts to criminal groups for a small sum but who otherwise do not participate in the money laundering process.¹⁵³

Corrupt officials

Cyber scam compounds have also thrived by exploiting corruption and patronage systems in host countries. This corruption appears to extend beyond lower-level bribery to high-level protection of the industry. Indeed, the evidence points to involvement by high-ranking law enforcement and other

government officials across the region and in all focus countries of this research. Corruption and bribery seemingly facilitate scam compound operations at every step of the supply chain.

For example, one victim reported that her recruiter facilitated an express pass at the immigration office in Laos.¹⁵⁴ This is not unique as border officials have been known to facilitate trafficking in persons and ignore signs of it across several countries in Southeast Asia.¹⁵⁵

Law enforcement complicity in cyber scam operations appears to be widespread, as police stations are sometimes located adjacent to scam compounds. There are also accounts of high-ranking police officers collecting bribes from scam operations.¹⁵⁶ For example, a former scam worker who had escaped a compound in Cambodia claimed that police forced him to sign a letter stating that he was working of his own free will and had not been kidnapped or physically abused.¹⁵⁷

Previous reports have also alleged that armed and uniformed Cambodian police officers may be directly working with trafficking networks and providing protection for convoys that transport people from one compound to another. Cambodian police units have reportedly conducted raids with the intention of extracting bribes and have sold rescued workers back to trafficking networks.¹⁵⁸

Grey zone: criminal perpetrator or victim?

There are countless pictures and videos posted on TikTok and other social media platforms that show the inside operations of scam compounds and the violence that takes place inside. The materials show people being beaten, held captive, tortured and forced to conduct physical exercise in the extreme heat. Posted directly from inside compounds, they constitute a unique and grim primary source.

Although most people who conduct scams are exposed to extreme pressure and physical abuse is common, not all low-level workers fit the profile of a 'perfect victim'. Instead, they fall along a spectrum.¹⁵⁹ While most are trafficked and forced into criminality, at the other end of the spectrum there exist 'career criminals' who work in the compounds willingly.¹⁶⁰ Some people fall in between. For instance, some may join willingly and might have known that they were being recruited to commit criminal acts, but find themselves unable to opt out of the work or to leave when they arrive at a compound.¹⁶¹ Others may have been deceived during recruitment but decide to stay even beyond the required period as they gain promotions, generate significant profits¹⁶² and pocket high commissions.¹⁶³ Media reporting also suggests that some scam workers have been rescued and returned multiple times to their home country, but keep on going back.¹⁶⁴ In addition, it appears that some people forced into the industry come to regard it as 'a job like any other'.¹⁶⁵ ■

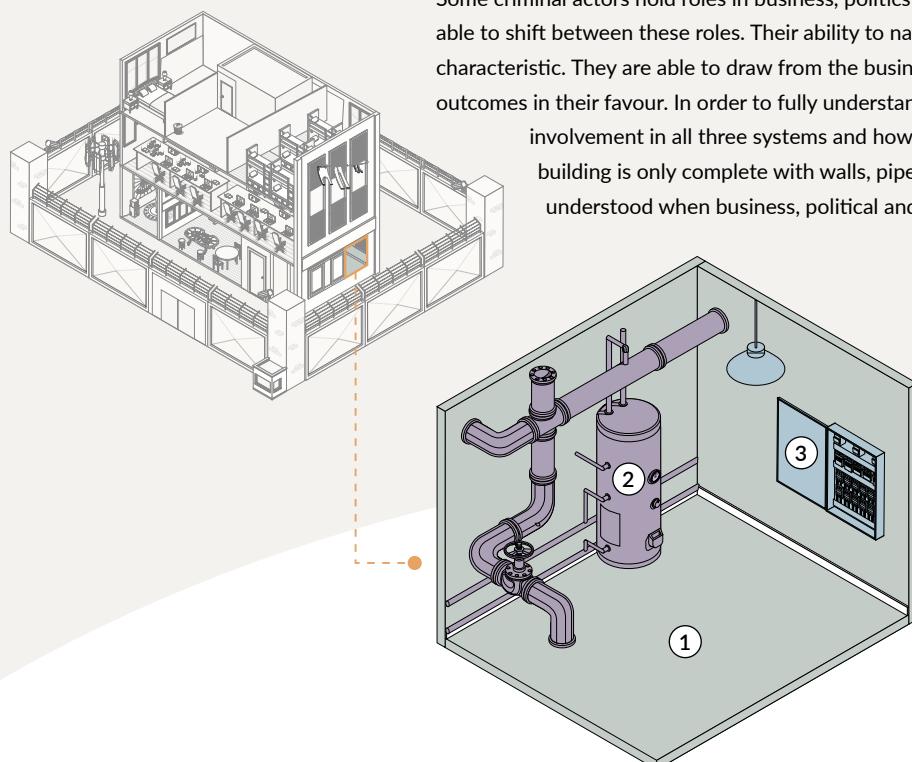
Role shifters

In the cyber scam ecosystem, a relatively small group of individuals appears to wield extraordinary influence. These actors – 'role shifters' – are not defined exclusively by their criminality; they appear to juggle multiple roles and can seamlessly transition between the realms of business, politics and crime, blurring the lines between legitimate and illicit activities. Their ability to navigate multiple networks is their defining characteristic, allowing them to adapt their roles as needed depending on the network they are engaging with.

'Role shifters' function as pivotal gatekeepers in the cyber scam landscape. They often determine who can establish and operate compounds, where these operations are located, and their duration based on the protection they receive. Whether by owning and renting out the compound facilities or controlling the police, their connections with the compounds shape not only individual locations but also the broader industry within countries and the wider region. When viewed through the lens of 'role shifters', the criminal ecosystem appears more ordered than is initially apparent. As the illicit market evolves and potentially consolidates, these gatekeepers could become even more crucial, potentially leading to increased competition among criminal groups vying for their favour or at least permission to operate. Many of these individuals are well-known figures in Southeast Asia, often recognized as successful businessmen and politicians.

As visualized below, role shifters own and direct multiple companies involved in real estate, casinos and online gambling operations in locations where scam operations have been recorded. Many are politically connected or are connected through family ties. In some cases, connections span multiple countries, highlighting the regional nature of the cybercrime phenomenon.

ROLE SHIFTERS ENABLING CYBER SCAM OPERATIONS



Some criminal actors hold roles in business, politics and crime simultaneously and appear to be able to shift between these roles. Their ability to navigate multiple networks is their defining characteristic. They are able to draw from the business, political and criminal realm to engineer outcomes in their favour. In order to fully understand their influence, it is crucial to look at their involvement in all three systems and how these overlap and interact. Just like a building is only complete with walls, pipes and electricity, their actions are better understood when business, political and criminal involvement is assessed together.

① Business (walls and foundation)

Role shifters own multiple companies in real estate, casinos, online gambling and other sectors. Many of these businesses host scam compounds directly or have served as fronts for other illicit operations. Businesses are quite literally the foundations of cyber scam operations.

② Politics (pipes and sewage)

Role shifters are all politically connected individuals, either holding public office or with government connections. Their political connections provide them with a layer of protection and impunity. They can seemingly make unwanted attention go away.

③ Crime (electricity)

Role shifters play key roles in cyber scam operations as well as other types of organized crime, including illegal gambling, trafficking in persons, illegal wildlife trade and illegal logging. Sometimes illicit profits can also buy more influence and power.



ENABLING INFRASTRUCTURE

While scams and fraud are not new phenomena, cyber scam operations are thriving in Southeast Asia because of the enabling infrastructure and the speed at which technology is developing and the increasing opportunities for its misuse. They also thrive through support from the private sector, which allows scam operations to hide behind a front of legitimate-seeming businesses.

Technology

Technological advances have been crucial to the growth of cyber scam operations. Some scam operations employ sophisticated tools like Sim boxes, allowing them to send out thousands of simultaneous calls or texts appearing to originate from local area codes.¹⁶⁶ Reports indicate compounds are using Starlink internet receivers, which directly connect to satellites to provide high-speed internet without requiring local internet infrastructure.¹⁶⁷ To avoid detection, some groups reportedly employ ‘mirror’ websites – copies of original websites, but using randomly-generated web addresses that change with each access.¹⁶⁸ Some scam operations exploit legitimate investment apps, available on mainstream platforms like Apple and Google, that sublicense external brokerage services, thereby enabling rogue firms to insert fraudulent investment links.¹⁶⁹

While technological advances have without doubt brought innovation to the criminal ecosystem, it remains unclear to what extent AI is being deployed, even as it rapidly evolves. Evidence suggests scam operations are experimenting with AI technologies to produce chatbot-generated conversations, photos and deepfakes,¹⁷⁰ with the latter reportedly being used to pass Know Your Customer screenings at banks.¹⁷¹ Some scam operations are reportedly exploiting the concept of AI as a marketing tool, including by using AI-related buzzwords in their investment pitches and incorporating AI-related terms in website URLs.¹⁷² Many reports suggest, however, that the people conducting the scams usually type out conversations with victims in their first or second language or use translation software,¹⁷³ rather than using AI to generate conversations.¹⁷⁴

Cryptocurrencies and high-risk virtual asset service providers, which are widely used to scam victims and serve as key money laundering tools, are also broadening the criminal ecosystem by attracting new networks and innovators.¹⁷⁵ One example is the proliferation of decentralized exchanges. Scam operations and money laundering networks use these to launder stolen cryptocurrency by ‘chain-hopping’,¹⁷⁶ which involves quickly moving crypto between wallets on different blockchains to try to spread out and obscure financial trails.¹⁷⁷ The rapid technological advances employed by scam operations and related money laundering networks have outpaced efforts to stop them.

Private sector

The current cyber scam industry in Southeast Asia relies heavily on goods and services supplied by the private sector, including technology described in the previous section, utilities, communication tools, transportation, financial and business incorporation services and much more. The examples in this section are far from an exhaustive list. The involvement of these businesses span a spectrum from unwitting enablers to active participants in the criminal economy.

Many legitimate companies, such as social media platforms, are misused by scammers. These platforms are exploited for recruiting scam workers, conducting scams and money laundering. Companies housing scam compounds use social media platforms for reputational laundering, posting content that projects a positive public image.¹⁷⁸ Encrypted messaging apps facilitate communication and peer-to-peer transactions within criminal networks.¹⁷⁹

Internet service providers (ISPs) and telecom operators provide internet and phone access to scam compounds. In Thailand, some ISPs and operators have reportedly provided these services illegally.¹⁸⁰ A study that traced the location of ISPs used by scam compounds in Cambodia and Myanmar found that most were based in Thailand. Some connectivity was provided by illegal internet lines stretching across Thailand's borders to Cambodia and Myanmar,¹⁸¹ and by mobile phone signal towers in Thailand pointing at Myanmar.¹⁸² Some scam compounds in Myawaddy (Myanmar) reportedly rely on towers provided by Mytel,¹⁸³ a joint venture between the Myanmar military and Viettel, a Vietnamese state-owned defence enterprise.¹⁸⁴

State-owned enterprises also appeared to contribute in meeting the needs of scam compounds. Thailand's Provincial Electricity Authority allegedly previously sold power to a company owned by the Karen National Army, which then distributed the power to regions with scam operations in Myanmar's Kayin State.¹⁸⁵ This contract was terminated in June 2023,¹⁸⁶ but reports suggest that electricity sales continued.¹⁸⁷ In February 2025, Thailand then announced a cut of electricity, internet and fuel supplies to five locations along its border with Myanmar as a response to scam centres.¹⁸⁸ The impact on scam centres, however, has been unclear, as some scam compounds had reportedly

Thai National Broadcasting Telecommunications Commission staff inspected mobile phone signal towers in Tak province in May 2024 and suspended 84 that they found were sending signals to Myanmar. Photo: NBTC on Facebook



bought generators to withstand the outage, meaning that residents outside the compounds were likely to be the worst affected.¹⁸⁹ Fuel shortages in Myanmar border areas were reported almost immediately after the announcement.¹⁹⁰

Businesses provide a range of other services that enable the movement of people and equipment between scam compounds. This includes transportation companies and courier services based in countries that host scam compounds and adjacent countries, particularly Thailand. For example, in June 2024, Thai police intercepted a shipment of 58 Starlink receivers destined for Mae Sot, Thailand (near Myawaddy), at a shipping company near Cambodia.¹⁹¹ Thai authorities have seized other scam-related items transported through the country, such as SIM cards and cell phones.¹⁹²

Many legitimate companies that enable cyber scams have policies and teams dedicated to reducing the risks of criminal misuse. For example, Facebook's parent company Meta said it is collaborating with Thai police to stop scams and fraud and removed 1.2 billion fake accounts between April and July 2024.¹⁹³ Yet the complex issue of private sector involvement in cyber scams, especially the blurred lines between legitimate and criminal businesses, requires much more attention by individual companies and regulators.

Beyond unintentional enablers, there are many companies directly controlled by or primarily serving criminal actors. Some owners use aliases or shell companies to disguise beneficial ownership, while others openly list themselves or family members as directors and shareholders of companies that are associated with scam compounds.¹⁹⁴

Examples of such companies include custom-built 'super apps' designed for exclusive use within scam compounds. These apps allow scam operations total control over financial transactions, including worker payments and internal purchases. Some apps resemble food delivery platforms but are used for money laundering purposes; the digital equivalent of an empty storefront.¹⁹⁵

Actors often base their operations in formally registered businesses such as hotels,¹⁹⁶ call centres,¹⁹⁷ businesses in 'hi-tech' industrial parks¹⁹⁸ and casinos.¹⁹⁹ In the Philippines, scam operations used licensed POGOs as front companies until the 2024 ban.²⁰⁰

Furthermore, various criminal actors and their families have registered a plethora of businesses that appear to piggyback on scam operations, such as those supplying construction and medical services, real estate, restaurants and transportation – all essential services for a small city. While these activities are not illegal per se, they are often owned by scam compound owners and managers or by their friends and business partners.²⁰¹

Money laundering and other goods and services that scam operations need can be found in online marketplaces, often based in Telegram channels. One of the first and largest marketplaces with 350 000 users was operated by the Kokang Border Guard Force (BGF) from Myanmar, but many similar marketplaces have cropped up throughout the region.²⁰² Scam operators (and other criminal actors) are able to connect with vendors selling GPS-trackers, electric shock shackles, electric batons, tear gas, target data (e.g., phone numbers), packages of photos used to create fake online profiles to target victims,²⁰³ scam software tools,²⁰⁴ white-label products and services (e.g., re-brandable websites),²⁰⁵ AI tools (e.g. AI face-changing deepfake software and generative AI chatbots) and many other goods and services.²⁰⁶

Huione Guarantee – part of the Huione Group, which is the same group behind Huione Pay – is allegedly 'the largest illicit online marketplace to have ever operated', according to blockchain analytics

firm Elliptic. The company reportedly hosts an online platform and chat groups where vendors sell scam-related equipment and software and advertise money laundering services.²⁰⁷ The company has denied these claims, yet admits that 'detention equipment' has been advertised for sale on the website and hidden users may commit fraud and money laundering through loopholes in the rules.²⁰⁸

In statements after the release of Elliptic's July 2024 report, Huione claimed it had deleted posts about selling the illegal equipment and noted the company was cooperating with Elliptic to 'let them help us with high-risk [cryptocurrency] address identification'.²⁰⁹ However, data published by Elliptic in January 2025 suggests the company's response continues to fall short. Meanwhile, monthly inflows to wallets linked to Huione Guarantee and its vendors reportedly increased by 51% and the number of site users to 900 000.²¹⁰ Parent company Huione Group has also since reportedly released its own 'ChatMe' messaging app integrated with Huione Guarantee and Huione Pay²¹¹ and a blockchain (Huione Chaine or Xone Chain²¹²) decentralized cryptocurrency exchange and stablecoin (USDH).²¹³ The range of tools and services offered made it an attractive one-stop shop for actors involved in the illicit industry.²¹⁴



HARMS AND IMPACTS

The harms caused by cyber scam operations across Southeast Asia are significant and multi-faceted. So far, attention has largely focused on the massive financial impact of scams worldwide and extreme psychological harm to victims (both forced recruits and fraud victims). Many have lost hundreds of thousands (or even millions) of US dollars, and some incur debts after surrendering their life savings.²¹⁵ Some victims commit suicide.²¹⁶ However, the data also sheds light on a diversity of additional harms at the national, regional and global levels.

Abuse and discrimination in compounds

There is increasing awareness of the harms done to victims of exploitation for forced criminality – the death and violence many are exposed to including through long working hours, beatings, torture and assassinations.²¹⁷ Gender-based violence, sexual abuse and racial discrimination are reported to be common.

Scam compound managers reportedly exploit racial and ethnic differences to control their workforce, sometimes segregating workers by nationality and seeding distrust among different groups. For example, in the Golden Triangle SEZ, some workers in the scam industry claimed that companies treated people from African countries worse than they did their Asian counterparts.²¹⁸ In addition, during police raids targeting specific nationalities, managers have been known to lock other workers in their rooms. Even when diverse groups are housed together, fear and suspicion appears to be preventing unity.²¹⁹

Some people working at scam compounds are also exposed to gender-based violence and discrimination. Women and LGBTQI+ individuals reportedly face disproportionate violence and sexual abuse. Indeed, survivors of scam compounds report sexual violence perpetrated by people described as 'big bosses' against female workers.²²⁰ A Vietnamese transgender woman rescued from the O'Smach compound in Cambodia described targeted abuse due to her gender identity.²²¹ Female staff working as 'models' – personas used to defraud scam victims – are forced to engage in sexual video calls with scam targets.²²² For instance, Indian men rescued from Cambodia reported that women had to conduct 'nude calls' with scam targets.²²³ Additionally, women are coerced into sexual exploitation if they underperform in their assigned roles or need to make more money to pay off debts to the operation.²²⁴

Entertainment venues within compounds also often exploit women by offering sex to external clients, criminal bosses and others working at the compound.²²⁵ In Myanmar, a former Kayin Border Guard

Force (BGF) member (a group now known as the Karen National Army, KNA) claimed that women working at the Shwe Kokko casino regularly left with a senior BGF officer.²²⁶ A 2023 raid on a POGO running online scams in Manila uncovered an in-house entertainment section where sex workers were displayed in a viewing chamber for customer selection.²²⁷ More research is needed to better understand the conditions of sexual exploitation and/or sex work at scam compounds in specific locations and across the region.

Threats to freedom and human rights

One of the most direct harms of cyber scam operations is the threat they pose to human rights, including the right to life, liberty and security of trafficking in persons victims forced to work in scam operations. Their human rights are not only violated inside the compounds but sometimes also after 'rescue', when they are unable to access adequate support and help by authorities, are detained on immigration charges or even resold by corrupt officials to other compounds. Most people identified at compounds do not appear to have access to justice or support by local authorities.

For example, police in Cambodia are reportedly unlikely to screen for trafficking victims if they come from compounds owned by powerful local elites,²²⁸ and in Myanmar, the military-controlled government is assumed to have made little effort to identify trafficking victims in the first place.²²⁹ By failing to recognize people rescued from scam compounds as human trafficking victims, governments risk revictimizing them and punishing them for unlawful acts they committed while detained in scam compounds.²³⁰

Furthermore, those who expose cyber scam operations are often at risk: the witnesses, survivors, whistle-blowers, journalists and activists who become targets of the authorities and/or suffer retribution from the criminals they expose.²³¹ For example, Mech Dara, a Cambodian investigative journalist who has reported extensively on the country's scam operations, was arrested in September 2024 on charges of inciting unrest.²³² Dara was released on bail after making an apology video and has since announced he will leave journalism because he is 'still afraid'.²³³ In addition, Chen Baorong – a Chinese businessman based in Sihanoukville and head of the Cambodia-China Charity, an organization that rescues and repatriates Chinese victims of trafficking – was arrested in 2022 and imprisoned for 10 months, after helping a presumed trafficking victim.²³⁴ Other NGO representatives have opted not to speak out for fear of retaliation or have moved to neighbouring countries instead.²³⁵

Countries across the region have also significantly restricted freedom of the media and access to information. In February 2023, Cambodia banned Voice of Democracy, one of the last independent media outlets in the country.²³⁶ Journalists also told the GI-TOC about 'lawfare' – threats of legal proceedings aimed at preventing them from publishing their findings – alongside surveillance, arbitrary arrests and threats, including some made by officials attending UN conferences.

Corruption of politics

The relationship between organized crime and corruption is circular and difficult to break, particularly as actors hold positions in business, politics and crime simultaneously.

Corruption also erodes trust in public institutions, in a region where this trust is already low.²³⁷ Corruption can also generate instability in international relations. For example, it appears that the relationship between countries in the region has been tested numerous times, including when scam

operations received prior warning of cross-border law enforcement operations, significantly reducing the number of workers rescued.²³⁸ Various representatives working at embassies and foreign ministries based in and/or covering the focus countries of this report have expressed frustration that local authorities appear not to be supporting the adequate rescue and repatriation of their citizens.

Political interests and corruption within countries also hamper regional cooperation. In 2023, Indonesia pushed for a common Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) approach on how to respond to scam compounds, but disagreements over the reality on the ground led to little practical collaboration. Despite a recent push for ASEAN to act from Chinese officials, there remains a divide within ASEAN, compounded by a failure to reach agreement on how to approach the conflict in Myanmar.²³⁹

Threats to peace and security

Cyber scam operations threaten the sovereignty of states. As criminal actors infiltrate politics and business, they undermine the government's ability to control borders against criminal networks.

Some international observers contend that safeguarding the cyber scam industry has become a strategic priority for governments where scam centres are operating due to its profitability and the high level of elite involvement. 'In some countries corruption appears to be so entrenched that if you take away the patronage system there could be major security concerns,' said one organized crime expert who focuses on the region, noting possible adverse consequences for service provision.²⁴⁰ Disrupting the criminal ecosystem in one location, therefore, could have regional security implications.

Criminal markets often proliferate in conflict zones; cyber scam operations are no exception. The instability triggered by the 2021 coup in Myanmar has amplified opportunities for cyber scam operations,



In April 2024, conflict near Myawaddy resulted in the Karen National Army consolidating control of Myawaddy and its illicit economy. Around 2 000 civilians fled to Thailand to escape the violence. © Kaung Zaw Hein/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

impacting not only those brought in to cyber scam operations but also civilians living in the area.²⁴¹ In some areas cyber scams have become a key source of revenue for the border guard forces under the authority of the Myanmar military and other nonstate armed groups involved in the criminal activity.²⁴²

Harming the economy and development

According to one estimate, the total annual revenue from pig-butchering scams was US\$12.8 billion in Cambodia, which is equivalent to almost half of the country's GDP (US\$31.7 billion in 2023); US\$10.9 billion in Laos, equivalent to more than two-thirds of GDP (US\$15.8 billion in 2023); and US\$15.3 billion in Myanmar, equivalent to almost one quarter of its GDP (US\$64.8 billion in 2023).²⁴³ These amounts are significant and often dwarf other well-embedded criminal economies, such as the illicit drug trade.²⁴⁴

Revenues generated by cyber scams also dwarf current official development assistance, which for Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and the Philippines together stood at just below US\$5 billion in 2022 according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)²⁴⁵ – or less than 10% of this criminal market.

USIP describes its estimate that scam 'syndicates' in mainland Southeast Asia defrauded victims of around US\$43.8 billion in 2023 as 'conservative'.²⁴⁶ This figure does not factor in the broader financial losses due to corruption and money laundering, as well as the inequality that organized crime and corruption create within societies. While the business owners of scam compounds and corrupt officials profit massively from the illicit industry, the average salary for a typical Cambodian is around US\$150 per month.

Profits stemming from the cyber scam industry therefore significantly distort national economies in Southeast Asia. Most of these profits either do not enter the region at all or are not put to productive use. Instead, it is likely that they are transferred to offshore financial centres or invested in real estate in Bangkok, Singapore, Dubai and elsewhere. 'We are talking about a massive transfer of wealth, out of the region where it is needed,' one expert noted.²⁴⁷

As the economies of Southeast Asia struggle to perform, young people often become disillusioned and vulnerable to recruitment. Some report seeking work in scam operations as the only job opportunity, while others are lured by quick investment schemes.²⁴⁸ This exacerbates a brain drain away from productive activity, as well-educated and tech-savvy young people are recruited to work in scam operations. Indeed, in 2022 and 2023, 75% of all victims who left scam compounds and were received by the International Organization of Migration were male, multilingual and highly educated, with 50% holding a higher-education degree.²⁴⁹ This burden is carried particularly by the countries of origin of the people who are trafficked and forced to scam.

The impact on the economy is further compounded by falls in legitimate investment and tourism to areas where scam compounds are prevalent. The reputational risk has been highlighted as a key concern by countries themselves. For instance, tourism from China to some Southeast Asian countries affected by scams is believed to have dropped in response to the Chinese film *No More Bets*, which portrays the cyber scam industry in an unspecified country in the region.²⁵⁰ In July 2024, the spokesperson for Cambodia's Ministry of Interior reiterated that the country is 'a safe tourism destination' and asserted 'that there has not been a single recorded instance of a tourist becoming a genuine victim of online scamming gangs or kidnappings.'²⁵¹

In January 2025, Chinese TV actor Wang Xing was allegedly trafficked to KK Park, a scam compound in Myawaddy, Myanmar, after being lured to Bangkok for a fake film opportunity. Although he was later released, his case reportedly triggered trip cancellations and renewed calls for the release of others allegedly held in KK Park and similar compounds.²⁵² In response, the news agency Radio Free Asia reported that local armed groups and business owners in Myawaddy had agreed to implement rules prohibiting forced labour, threats, torture, child labour, human trafficking and scam operations, according to a source described as a businessman.²⁵³ Thai officials maintained that only 'first-time (Chinese) tourists in tour groups' cancelled their trips, while 'free independent travellers' continued to arrive. In addition, Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra announced plans to personally assure Chinese President Xi Jinping of Thailand's safety for Chinese tourists.²⁵⁴

Tearing societies apart

Cyber scam operations are reported to sow fear and suffering in communities and there is widespread evidence that it erodes social, family and community ties and values. The impact is especially stark in smaller villages and border areas where these operations take place. For example, almost all local people researchers spoke to in O'Smach in Cambodia were aware of what was happening and had witnessed or assisted in some element of an escape from the compounds.²⁵⁵

This has created a feeling of helplessness as everybody knows about what is going on, but nobody knows what to do about it. One villager in O'Smach reported: 'They can control the situation; that's why the news does not spread ... There was one Vietnamese victim whose fingers got cut off inside the compound, but the police came and arrested him [the victim] so that they can control the narrative.'²⁵⁶

In many cases it has completely changed the character of the town. This is probably most visible in Sihanoukville, which has become a boom-and-bust town. In the Golden Triangle SEZ and Myawaddy, which have seen growing numbers of Chinese citizens, this includes the increased use of Chinese language (including in signage) and the elevation of the yuan to the de facto legal currency.²⁵⁷

Family ties have also been put under strain, as some spend months trying to reconnect with family members working in scam compounds, or who are held in detention by authorities before repatriation.²⁵⁸ Many families have also reportedly paid ransoms of between US\$3 000 and US\$30 000 to secure the release of a family member.²⁵⁹



An abandoned casino in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. Residents have witnessed the city's dramatic transformation from a sleepy backwater into a gambling and scam hub.
© Valeria Mongelli/Getty Images

Environmental harms

Criminal actors profiting from cyber scam operations have also been linked to other types of crime, including illegal logging, sand trafficking and the illegal wildlife trade.²⁶⁰

Some construction for cyber scam operations causes significant environmental damage, particularly where such activity takes place in economic development zones. These zones have been associated with water and air pollution, deforestation, erosion, river diversion and sand dredging and the illegal wildlife trade. In Myawaddy, Myanmar, developers cleared forests and farmland for buildings that now allegedly host scam operations.²⁶¹

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that organized crime can have some perceived benefits, in addition to the harm it causes. Local residents have found work inside scam compounds (e.g. cleaning services and construction).²⁶² Also infrastructure has improved in many remote areas as a result of scam operations – such as water, electricity or telecommunication services that serve the compounds and the communities – highlighting the complexities of responding to cybercrimes without worsening the vulnerabilities of communities that depend on them for survival or stability.

For some, working at cyber scam operations has been a ticket to upward social mobility, particularly for young people who are successful at scamming and who earn sizeable commissions and bonuses.²⁶³ The salary offers used to recruit people to conduct scams are usually higher than local average salaries,²⁶⁴ although what the salary workers end up getting is sometimes much lower than initially promised.²⁶⁵ An Indonesian national trafficked to a scam compound in Phnom Penh noted they had acquired key skills, such as the art of persuasion of closing sales. Nevertheless, some may not be able to apply these skills in the legitimate economy – partly because of lack of options or because of the stigma attached – and find themselves forced to return to the scam industry. Aside from the violent punishments, they said it was a 'good job' because it 'shows how we are smarter than others'.²⁶⁶ Meanwhile, bribes paid to police officers have become a supplementary source of income, especially in a system where they are often forced to pay up the chain of command.

CASE STUDIES

We examine below four scam compounds in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines. These countries, once primarily source and transit points for trafficking in persons networks,²⁶⁷ have become major destination countries for such operations.

When this report was first finalized in October 2024, the Baofu compound in the Philippines appeared to have been shut down and was under investigation by the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission.²⁶⁸ Crackdowns have also been announced in other locations cited in our case studies, but the broad picture is one of continued activity, albeit sometimes in more fragmented and smaller-scale compounds, rather than imminent closure.

O'Smach, Cambodia

O'Smach exemplifies how scam compounds are ‘hidden in plain sight’ and embedded in local economies. This case study highlights the mobility of scam operations and their use of existing infrastructure.

Located near Cambodia’s northern border with Thailand, O’S mach is a town of about 11 000 inhabitants. Until the late 1990s, the region was occupied by the Khmer Rouge, which perpetrated a genocide that killed an estimated 2.5 million people between 1975 and 1979.²⁶⁹ The area remains remote, and government services are limited.

The town is dominated by casino and hotel complexes, which sit between Cambodian and Thai passport control counters, allowing visitors to access them from both sides.²⁷⁰ The entrances to two casinos are directly adjacent to a police station and customs checkpoint.²⁷¹

The scam compounds

Both O’S mach Resort and Royal Hill Resort have heavily guarded multi-story buildings believed to house scam workers.²⁷² At both locations, construction of new dormitories was observed during a site visit in March 2024, which suggested possible future expansion of the workforce.²⁷³

The transformation of these resorts into scam compounds occurred over several years. In 2018, residents observed an influx of workers believed to be Chinese and Vietnamese at both resorts, and residents say these workers frequented local shops.²⁷⁴ In 2020, the situation changed. Workers stayed inside, ostensibly



FIGURE 2 Cambodia, showing the location of O'Smach near the border with Thailand.



O'Smach Resort (left) and Royal Hill Resort (right) have heavily guarded multi-story buildings believed to house scam workers. Photos: GI-TOC

for COVID-19 safety protocols, but they never came out again.²⁷⁵ 'They have everything they need inside,' a local observer noted. 'Shops, KTVs [karaoke bars], restaurants, beer gardens ... everything, except free-dom.'²⁷⁶ Evidence suggests that scam operations expanded to locations such as O'Smach as crackdowns in Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh forced operators to seek out less visible, less scrutinized locations.²⁷⁷

The first reported suspicious death at O'Smach Resort came on 5 December 2020 when a Chinese woman fell from the second floor of the hotel. While both Khmer and English versions of the story claim she jumped, only the original Khmer source notes that one of the woman's eyes was bruised in a manner that indicated 'she was beaten.'²⁷⁸ This was the first in a series of suspicious deaths connected to the compound reported by the media.²⁷⁹

By October 2022, the compounds linked to forced scamming were exposed.²⁸⁰ Reports emerged of trafficking in persons and forced criminality at O'Smach Resort, as Cambodian authorities rescued 75 foreigners from the location.²⁸¹ Workers described gruelling 12-hour workdays, building fake online profiles and coaxing victims to 'invest' in fraudulent cryptocurrency schemes. Resistance or failure to perform allegedly triggered severe punishment, including food deprivation, beatings and torture.²⁸² 'They torture like during the Khmer Rouge,' said a security guard at one of the compounds.²⁸³

In O'Smach, the compounds' activities are widely known and multiple residents claim to have witnessed people escaping and running into the forests nearby.²⁸⁴ Yet, given the challenging and constrained media environment within the country, the stories of violence from inside the compound largely stay in O'Smach.²⁸⁵ Social media, particularly TikTok, have therefore become crucial for people inside the compound to spread information and call for help.²⁸⁶

Many residents have helped escaped workers by providing food, clothing and cash, the latter to call relatives or find transportation out of town.²⁸⁷ In just a few months, one family assisted 30 Vietnamese men who escaped. Also, Cambodian workers – cleaners, kitchen staff and construction workers, who are among the rare few to freely enter and exit the compounds – are reported to have assisted in some escapes.²⁸⁸ Others are fearful and stay away from the compounds, knowing that getting involved could endanger themselves and their families.²⁸⁹

NGOs involved in rescues from O'Smach believe some of the people forced to scam were relocated from Myanmar's Kokang Special Administrative Zone in late 2023.²⁹⁰ As authorities stage more crackdowns in the Golden Triangle SEZ and Myawaddy,²⁹¹ it is plausible that some may relocate to O'Smach to fill the newly built dormitories.

Despite the reporting, scam operations appeared to continue in early 2025. In January 60 workers, many from Nepal and Pakistan, were reported to have escaped the compound.²⁹²

The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, Laos

The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ), located in Laos' Bokeo province, demonstrates how scam compounds exploit SEZs and benefit from elite protection, challenging the notion that the zone is beyond the limits of state control.

The Golden Triangle, where Laos, Myanmar and Thailand intersect, has long been known for transnational crime and collusion between drug traffickers and law enforcement.²⁹³ Laos established this SEZ in 2007²⁹⁴ and later partnered with Zhao Wei and his company, Dok Ngiew Kham Group (Kings Romans Group),²⁹⁵ in a bid to change its 'negative reputation' as a 'drug zone'.²⁹⁶ Today, the project is reportedly 80% owned by Kings Romans Group and 20% by Laos.²⁹⁷

While the zone attracted significant investments — at least US\$2 billion, according to the GTSEZ WeChat channel²⁹⁸ — the Golden Triangle's reputation endures.²⁹⁹ It is still alleged to be a 'criminal enclave'³⁰⁰ consisting of multiple converging criminal markets.³⁰¹

The scam compounds

The GTSEZ appears to host numerous scam compounds. As of August 2024, Laotian officials acknowledged that up to 400 illegal 'call centres' were operating scams in the zone, a reported increase of more than 30% from 2022,³⁰² but still a very conservative estimate. By analysing WeChat and Telegram groups used by scam industry insiders, the GI-TOC identified 30 distinct locations with scam compounds.³⁰³ Various criminal groups appear to be operating alongside each other, renting entire buildings, floors or individual offices.³⁰⁴ The GTSEZ management committee, chaired by Zhao Wei, is regarded as being in overall charge, renting out buildings and managing security.³⁰⁵

Security is the responsibility of the GTSEZ 'public security bureau', which is a private security force.³⁰⁶ Laos' Ministry of Public Security, whose Anti-Trafficking Department investigates trafficking-related



FIGURE 3 The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, located near the tri-border area between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.



A Lao military officer stands guard near the Kings Romans Casino in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone. © Pongmanat Tasiri/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

cases, maintains an office and officers inside the GTSEZ.³⁰⁷ This ministry has coordinated raids with Chinese authorities to detain and deport alleged scam workers.³⁰⁸ Despite this, the agency has been accused of failing to investigate human trafficking cases proactively and did not screen SEZ workers for signs of trafficking and forced criminality in 2023.³⁰⁹ Additionally, according to local sources, soldiers affiliated with two ethnic armed organizations from Myanmar also provide security services in the zone: the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA).³¹⁰ The GI-TOC was unable to verify this claim independently. However, information shared via a UWSA-linked WeChat account seems to confirm this. In this communication, the UWSA appears to recall members from the GTSEZ to Wa territory.³¹¹ The US has also previously alleged that connections exist between Zhao Wei and the UWSA in running major drug trafficking operations out of the GTSEZ.³¹²

The number of people forced to work as scam operatives in the GTSEZ is not known. However, USIP estimates at least 85 000 foreign nationals work in Laos' scam compounds, most of which are based in the GTSEZ.³¹³ These people are trafficked from abroad and bussed through Laos or ferried by boat from Thailand and Myanmar.³¹⁴ Some migrant workers and Laotians enter the GTSEZ willingly and later become workers at the scam operations.³¹⁵

Conditions in the compounds are harsh, with many victims reporting being beaten and punished in other ways (for example, by being forced to stand in the sun for hours) for failing to meet their quotas.³¹⁶ Work days are reported to be extremely long, typically between 12 and 20 hours.³¹⁷ The work involves conducting a variety of scams and fraud, ranging from investment scams to 'nude chat' extortion and running fake gambling sites.³¹⁸ Scam operations also use debt bondage tactics – including arbitrary fines and incentive structures based on scam success – to consolidate control over their workforce.³¹⁹

Nearby, Bokeo International Airport, which is now the third-largest airport in Laos, officially opened in February 2024.³²⁰ While the airport was ostensibly built to serve tourists,³²¹ a person rescued from the GTSEZ claimed they were flown to Bokeo by their captors.³²² If it accepts more commercial flights,³²³ observers warn the airport could facilitate human trafficking on a massive scale.³²⁴

Elite protection of the GTSEZ

A common narrative holds that the GTSEZ is off limits to state officials. Indeed, a scam worker recalled being threatened by his manager who said: 'There is no government here ... we can kill you.'³²⁵ Yet Laotian officials and police are present and have described the GTSEZ as 'properly managed and operated'.³²⁶ Legally speaking, SEZs are subject to the central government's 'macro management' while maintaining autonomy in administration and business decisions.³²⁷

Nevertheless, Laos police have reportedly faced constraints in the zone in the past, possibly imposed by higher-ranking officials.³²⁸ Currently, however, the situation may be in flux, as Zhao Wei and Laotian authorities reportedly issued an ultimatum to cyber scam operators to vacate the GTSEZ in August 2024.³²⁹ However, Zhao Wei appears to have announced the crackdown to businesses weeks ahead of the action as well as warning them ahead of patrols.³³⁰ While previous crackdowns in the zone had little effect,³³¹ Chinese authorities have then been involved in larger joint law enforcement action.³³² It remains to be seen whether this marks a substantial campaign to oust scam compounds from the zone or a temporary or even selective effort. Researchers who visited the zone in late 2024 and again in April 2025 reported to the GI-TOC that businesses continued, including beyond the borders of the zone.

Shwe Kokko, Myanmar

Myawaddy is a classic example of a border area nurturing criminal activity. Perhaps less apparent, however, are the complex relationships within the ecosystem that shift as various actors vie for a share in the illicit economy. This case study focuses on Shwe Kokko, one of several scam compounds in the region.

Located on a bend in the Moei River on Myanmar's border with Thailand, Shwe Kokko Myaing (hereafter, Shwe Kokko) sits just north of Myawaddy, a bustling economic hub.³³³ The former Kayin BGF, now rebranded as the KNA³³⁴ controls the area and most licit and illicit trade.³³⁵

Development of Shwe Kokko – or Yatai New City³³⁶ – began in 2017 as a joint venture between a KNA company, Chit Linn Myaing, and Yatai International Holdings Group (Yatai).³³⁷ The US\$15 billion 'smart city' project³³⁸ incorporated blockchain technology for its financial infrastructure, developed by BCB Blockchain and Fincy, to facilitate currency exchanges and international transactions.³³⁹

Key figures involved in Shwe Kokko appear to include Colonel San Myint (commonly known as Saw Chit Thu) of the KNA and Chinese nationals, including former Yatai Chairman She Zhijiang, Chinese businessman Zhong Baojia and a variety of other actors and entities affiliated with the Chinese state.³⁴⁰ When Yatai registered a subsidiary in Myanmar, She Zhijiang was the largest shareholder.³⁴¹ He reportedly made an initial down payment to Saw Chit Thu who signed the lease to develop the so-called Myanmar Yatai Shwe Kokko SEZ at Shwe Kokko.³⁴² At the time of writing, She Zhijiang was detained in Thailand for illegal gambling charges and faces extradition to China.³⁴³ He claims that Yatai would never permit telecoms fraud and scams in its vicinity.³⁴⁴

According to Justice for Myanmar investigations, Saw Chit Thu is deeply involved in Shwe Kokko and illicit businesses in the area.³⁴⁵ The KNA collects tax revenue directly from businesses inside Shwe Kokko³⁴⁶ and reportedly keeps 30% of the total profit, while Yatai retains 70%.³⁴⁷ Additionally, the KNA



FIGURE 4 Myanmar, showing the location of Shwe Kokko near the border with Thailand.



Numerous scam operations are reported to be based in and around Myawaddy. Some workers are recruited locally or from across Southeast Asia and beyond. © Manan Vatsyayana/AFP via Getty Images

reportedly gives the Myanmar military between 10% and 50% of the roughly US\$192 million of its own share of annual profit.³⁴⁸ Shwe Kokko is therefore a major source of revenue for its stakeholders. Additionally, Saw Chit Thu and his relatives reportedly own at least six KNA businesses,³⁴⁹ including two properties outside Shwe Kokko³⁵⁰ where scam compounds have been reported.³⁵¹ In October 2024, Saw Chit Thu and his company Chit Linn Myaing Group were sanctioned by the EU for their involvement in scam compounds;³⁵² Saw Chit Thu had previously been sanctioned by the UK in 2023. In February 2025, media also reported that Thailand was preparing to issue arrest warrants for leaders of the Myanmar junta-allied Karen State BGF on charges of transnational human trafficking, allegedly including Saw Chit Thu.³⁵³

Scam compounds in Shwe Kokko

Shwe Kokko was initially aimed at attracting online gambling companies.³⁵⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, some converted to scams while others added scams to their online gambling operations.³⁵⁵ While operations have been flourishing, there have also been several campaigns to clear the city's image. For example, in May 2024, the KNA announced plans to clear out scam compounds from Shwe Kokko. However, this process has been gradual and voluntarily. A KNA major noted: 'It's important to remember that when there are thousands of people in one place, it is impossible to send all of them home in a short time ... They have to pack their belongings to leave, making it logically difficult for large groups to depart all at once.'³⁵⁶

Prior to that crackdown, small and medium-sized scam operators potentially numbering in the thousands rented space in buildings alongside casinos and KTV bars.³⁵⁷ Workers at scam compounds are foreigners and Myanmar nationals, many of whom are recruited by recruiters working in Myanmar.³⁵⁸

Various scams are perpetrated, but cryptocurrency investment schemes appear to predominate.³⁵⁹ Workplace conditions are severe, with reported 12+ hour workdays and harsh punishments. In video footage obtained by Radio Free Asia, victims appeared to be tortured with cattle prods, beaten and burned.³⁶⁰

While the KNA is administratively linked to Myanmar's military, it has semi-autonomous control over economic activity in Shwe Kokko. This jurisdictional ambiguity enables plausible deniability regarding illegal activities.³⁶¹ However, the UK and the US have imposed sanctions on both Saw Chit Thu and She Zhijiang for providing support for and obtaining benefit from 'trafficking of individuals to Shwe Kokko ... where they were forced to work as scammers', and the UK designation also cites She Zhijiang's involvement at KK Park.³⁶² Both have denied wrongdoing,³⁶³ and Saw Chit Thu claimed no illicit activity was occurring in Shwe Kokko.³⁶⁴ Yatai and the KNA have also denied reports of illegal gambling, human trafficking and forced criminality in Shwe Kokko.³⁶⁵ 'We did not know that they would operate scams,' a major in the KNA stated in May 2024. 'We only saw that they use computers. We didn't know what they were doing.'³⁶⁶ Journalists visiting the area in late 2024 reported that 'Yatai says there are no more scams in Shwe Kokko. It has put up huge billboards all over town proclaiming, in Chinese, Burmese and English, that forced labour is not allowed, and that "online businesses" should leave.'³⁶⁷ However, they also reported that local people reported that scams and forced labour continued.³⁶⁸

Other scam operations near Myawaddy

In addition to Shwe Kokko, several other scam parks have been identified near Myawaddy.³⁶⁹ Two of the most notorious are KK Park and Dongmei Park (originally called Saixigang Industrial Park).

KK Park appears to be one of the largest compounds, reported to house thousands of people who are forced to perpetrate scams.³⁷⁰ Dongmei Park, reportedly built to accommodate scam groups forced out of Sihanoukville,³⁷¹ is assumed to be owned by 14K triad leader Wan Kuok-koi ('Broken Tooth') and several Malaysian nationals.³⁷² Both Wan Kuok-koi and Dongmei Group were sanctioned by the US in 2020.³⁷³

Many other scam parks have been identified by researchers and journalists near Myawaddy, including Kosai Casino, Jinxin Park, Apollo Park, Dongfanghui, TM Park, Hengsheng Park, the Huanya International New City project and Yulong (Yulongwan) Bay Park.³⁷⁴ Many are allegedly run and/or owned by Chinese-speaking criminal groups and family members of high-ranking military figures. They are also said to be protected by various armed groups operating in the region.³⁷⁵ ■

Alliances in flux

These scam operations benefit from protection characterized by complex alliances.³⁷⁶ For instance, just prior to Myanmar's 2021 coup, Saw Chit Thu and other BGF/KNA leaders threatened to resign in response to the then civilian government's investigation of alleged bribery related to Shwe Kokko.³⁷⁷ Some observers believe it was General Min Aung Hlaing, current head of the military-run government, who persuaded them not to resign, perhaps by informing them of the plans for a coup and negotiating a profit-sharing agreement.³⁷⁸

Several events have disrupted these alliances. For example, in January 2024, when the former Kayin BGF renamed itself as the KNA,³⁷⁹ it ostensibly cut ties with the military.³⁸⁰ Several months later, the KNA helped the Myanmar military regain control of territory from another ethnic armed organization by acting as a neutral third party.³⁸¹ Some observers and journalists believe Saw Chit Thu used the opportunity to play both sides – Myanmar's military and the armed group – while also trying to increase his own power and control of the illicit economy.³⁸² What is clear is that allegiances in the Myawaddy border region are complex and continually shifting, with most armed actors in the region involved or complicit in scam centre operations in some form.

The future of Shwe Kokko's scam operations remains uncertain, yet many signs indicate that Shwe Kokko will not be shut down.³⁸³ Notably, in August 2024, Saw Chit Thu, Buddhist monks, public officials and 'supporters' organized a ceremony for She Zhijiang's health and 'speedy return' to Shwe Kokko.³⁸⁴ A cyber scam expert on Myanmar reported that in early September 2024, Yatai management established a new committee and policies, further suggesting continuity.³⁸⁵ Another crackdown appeared to be taking place in early 2025 in response to Thai and Chinese pressure, which led to thousands of foreigners being freed from Myanmar's scam centres.³⁸⁶ However, many of those rescued appear to remain trapped at the border area where conditions are dire and have remained challenging in the aftermath of the March 2025 earthquake. Nonetheless, some scam operations have been observed to be fragmenting and relocating south to Payathonzu, Kayin state, travelling in convoys flanked by KNA cars.³⁸⁷ Others are likely relocating to the many less-scrutinized scam facilities in Myawaddy.³⁸⁸

Bamban, the Philippines

The Baofu compound in Bamban provides an example of a local elite acting as a gatekeeper and possibly as an instigator of the scam compound. It also provides insights into how POGOs – which are now banned – were previously used as a front to hide illegal scam operations.

Located just 100 kilometres north of Manila, the small city of Bamban describes itself as a 'gateway for economic growth ... driven by good governance'.³⁸⁹ Central to this case is Alice Guo, who rose from obscurity to become Bamban's first female mayor in 2022.³⁹⁰ Prior to her election, Guo co-founded Baofu Land Development in 2019,³⁹¹ which acquired eight parcels of land and spent US\$104.3 million building a 7.9 hectare compound adjacent to the municipal hall.³⁹² The Baofu compound hosted 36 buildings, including villas, two seven-storey dormitories, offices and an Olympic-sized swimming pool.³⁹³

At peak operation, the Baofu compound housed multiple POGOs. Prior to becoming mayor, Guo reportedly helped one such company, Hongsheng Gaming Technology, apply for permission to operate there.³⁹⁴ Hongsheng lost its licence in 2023 for running cryptocurrency scams,³⁹⁵ after which it allegedly changed its name to Zun Yuan Technology and continued operating on three floors of the Baofu administration buildings.³⁹⁶

Notably, the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) maintained an office on one of the three floors.³⁹⁷ This was before the federal ban on POGOs, therefore PAGCOR was still licensing casinos, including those based in the Baofu compound. Despite their proximity to scam operations, PAGCOR reported no red flags.³⁹⁸

A police raid of the compound came after an escaped Vietnamese citizen claimed he crawled through a riverbed to a nearby farm. Security guards from Zun Yuan reportedly pursued the man and tried to force a local family to turn him over.³⁹⁹ The Malaysian embassy also sent an urgent appeal to the Filipino Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission to help trafficking victims inside the Baofu compound.⁴⁰⁰

On 12 March 2024, police from the Metro Manila office of the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group served two search warrants to Zun Yuan Technology for suspected human trafficking and illegal detention.⁴⁰¹ When they entered Baofu, police found 678 people of various nationalities, including Filipinos.⁴⁰² Authorities immediately deported 165 of the foreigners to China.⁴⁰³ They also found evidence of scam operations, including phone banks and computers, scam instruction manuals, shotguns and hidden rooms.⁴⁰⁴

Elite protection of Baofu

During the ensuing investigation, Guo came under scrutiny and has since been dismissed from office. Documents (including utility and other bills) addressed to Guo and an SUV registered under her name were found in the compound.⁴⁰⁵ Additionally, local police units reported to Guo and the police station was adjacent to the compound and municipal hall, strongly suggesting knowledge if not complicity on the part of the police.⁴⁰⁶



FIGURE 5 The Philippines, showing the location of Bamban.



Former mayor of Bamban Alice Guo faces multiple charges of money laundering, trafficking in persons, tax evasion and obtaining Filipino citizenship through fraud. © Jam Sta Rosa/AFP via Getty Images

Under oath, Guo claimed ignorance of the criminal activities in Baofu and downplayed her involvement in the Hongsheng POGO.⁴⁰⁷ Guo's citizenship was also questioned due to discrepancies on her birth certificate.⁴⁰⁸ In July, the National Bureau of Investigation published a fingerprint analysis which suggested she might be Guo Hua Ping, a Chinese national who emigrated to the Philippines in 2003, raising questions about her identity and involvement in Bamban.⁴⁰⁹

The challenges of prosecuting a state-embedded actor tied to scam compounds became apparent when Guo failed to appear at senate hearings and then fled the country by boat.⁴¹⁰ In early September 2024, however, Guo was arrested in Indonesia and deported back to the Philippines.⁴¹¹ She now faces numerous complaints and charges for trafficking in persons, money laundering, tax evasion and misrepresenting her identity in the mayoral election; she has pleaded not guilty.⁴¹²

Recent investigations have revealed further potential connections between Guo, scam operations in the Baofu compound and regional criminal networks. Two individuals who were involved in incorporating Baofu Land Development alongside Guo were convicted in Singapore as part of the earlier cited S\$3 billion money laundering case in 2023.⁴¹³ In the Philippines, ongoing investigations are examining the possible involvement of former government officials in the Baofu scam operations,⁴¹⁴ including one who allegedly consulted for both Hongsheng (the reported scam operator at Baofu) and Lucky South 99, a POGO operator currently facing accusations of trafficking in persons and operating scam compounds in Cebu and Pampanga.⁴¹⁵ While these investigations are still in progress and no final legal determinations have been made, the allegations, if proven, would demonstrate systemic corruption and broader criminal connections rather than isolated cases.⁴¹⁶



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cyber scam operations inflict multi-faceted harms on fundamental aspects of society in Southeast Asia, by shackling hundreds of thousands of forced recruits to a life of exploitation, undermining economic stability, impeding wider development, eroding good governance and destroying societal trust.

These impacts resonate at the local, national, regional and global levels. Indeed, the scale of exploitation of forced labour, recruitment from areas of vulnerability and conflict around the world, the global proliferation of fraud victims and the staggering profits generated for increasingly powerful organized criminal groups mean that the region's cyber scam industry has become a threat to international peace and security.⁴¹⁷ The complex entanglement of criminal operations throughout Southeast Asia necessitates a comprehensive response that tackles the criminal ecosystem holistically rather than by focusing on individual criminal markets. Traditional criminal justice responses and siloed approaches targeting specific crimes have proven insufficient. The issue is more complex than a single country or institution can deal with on its own.

Instead, there is an urgent need to break down barriers among involved stakeholders, for policymakers and law enforcement to share best practices across crime types and to develop integrated strategies across the region and beyond.

Such efforts will face powerful vested interests, even as leading actors in Southeast Asia work tirelessly to strengthen existing interventions, identify new entry points and reduce harms. Tackling key drivers – corruption, tech as well as private sector infrastructure – offers an important starting point.

Notwithstanding the existing sanctioning of a few major criminal players, greater efforts should also be made by the international community to hold complicit elites to account. By working with them despite strong knowledge of their wrongdoing, the international community risks legitimizing their actions.

The recommendations below identify approaches that could be pursued by key actors who seek to engineer positive change.

Who? All stakeholders

What? Raise awareness on the multi-faceted harms

Responses should be guided by awareness of the multi-faceted harms inflicted by cyber scams. A comprehensive strategy should not only focus on stopping the financial crimes but also on reducing the most harmful aspects of the scam industry and its wide-ranging impacts on individuals, societies and economies. This should involve supporting the immediate needs of individual victims but also requires addressing the individual and collective vulnerabilities exploited by cyber scams. For instance, there is a clear need to better understand the changing profiles of people targeted by operations and to increase awareness among potential victims. Furthermore, it is essential to address the long-term economic and societal impacts of the scam industry on communities at source, and to focus on young people who are drawn into the scam industry.

Who? Local governments

What? Prioritize the reduction of areas of weak accountability

The ability of scam compounds to exploit blurred areas of accountability and the rule of law – such as in some border areas and SEZs – is a feature of scam compounds that must be addressed. Governments need to reassert authority in SEZs and border areas where oversight is limited or where authorities have been corrupted. The practice of permitting unofficial or self-proclaimed SEZs or relinquishing governance in certain regions has inadvertently fostered criminal activity. Closing SEZs altogether or at least reclaiming effective control over these areas is essential for mounting a successful fight against organized crime and corruption. Closures should be considered only in tandem with compensatory economic development strategies that would provide legitimate economic opportunities to communities and would counter the clear unintended consequences of businesses moving away from these areas. To be effective, such a policy must also be preceded by the exposure of corruption and the development of anti-corruption measures to tackle the wider permissive environment that has allowed the cyber scam industry to flourish.

Who? National governments

What? Identify entry points to create political will

Achieving meaningful change requires substantial political will, which at present appears lacking. Nonetheless, examples of national efforts exist, including the Philippines' ban on POGOs in July 2024,⁴¹⁸ and scam-related money laundering investigations and prosecutions in Singapore. These examples constitute potential areas to focus engagement in other countries.

Government actors should also consider responses that might not require additional political buy-in or where support might already exist. Such actions could focus on reversing the significant economic impact caused by damage to the region's reputation. These approaches may offer more immediate ways to address the issue, while building momentum for broader reforms.

Who? The international community and the private sector

What? Push for stronger regulation of global technology companies globally through private-public partnerships

While technological advancements have enabled some aspects of the criminal market, they also offer significant opportunities for legitimate business growth and improved livelihoods. The focus should be on attempting to future-proof responses to stay ahead of criminal adaptations. This involves leveraging private sector knowledge and data to anticipate and counter emerging threats. Collaborative efforts between legitimate tech companies, financial institutions and law enforcement agencies can lead

to more effective cyber scam and wider fraud prevention and detection mechanisms. In addition, companies facilitating crime need to be made more aware of – and held accountable for – the misuse of technology that they create and sell.

Who? The international community

What? Expose enablers of cyber scams and impose penalties

More effort needs to be put into going after the enablers and supporting infrastructure – the people and businesses who provide key services to the industry – including money laundering support. This should include a range of sanctions tailored to the offence, including criminal and civil penalties, naming and shaming as well as the blacklisting of individuals and companies that are not in compliance with regulations. Enablers must also be included in sanction designations.

Who? Multilateral and regional organizations, specifically the UN, ASEAN and the Bali Process

What? Close regional loopholes and strengthen collaboration

A regional approach is needed because many of the criminal actors driving and profiting from cyber scams are not tied to a specific jurisdiction. This is true of the computer programmers, white-label service providers and money laundering actors who facilitate scam operations. Similarly, people forced to conduct the scams are recruited globally and could potentially work anywhere local conditions allow it. As long as the approach remains country-focused, loopholes will be exploited and the situation will remain akin to a game of ‘whack-a-mole’.

Given the transnational nature of these criminal networks, and the ease with which scam operations continue to relocate across borders, strengthening regional cooperation is paramount. This needs to go beyond dialogue and requires concrete measures that strengthen information sharing and cooperation between governments, particularly law enforcement agencies – already initiated by UNODC,⁴¹⁹ the Bali Process, including through its Regional Support Office, and ASEAN – but also strengthening regional private sector and civil society networks. Thailand has a key role to play in this, not least given its geographic position in the ‘middle’ of mainland Southeast Asia’s cyber scam phenomenon. Its recent efforts to crack down on scam operations and money laundering networks could serve as a catalyst for regional action, potentially enabling cooperation and encouraging other countries to follow suit.⁴²⁰

Who? Civil society

What? Build local resilience and strengthen the social fabric in affected communities

Engaging and supporting local communities in affected areas is crucial. While this would look different in each place, efforts could focus on building resilience to criminal exploitation, supporting victims and strengthening prevention programmes, including through improving digital and financial literacy. It could also bolster free and independent media to mitigate the shrinking space in which civil society operates. Such grassroots efforts are vital to complement top-down approaches.

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