# Gruesome cost of bungled Pogo exit

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The script practically writes itself: A kidnapped Chinese teenager’s pinkie finger is chopped off; his driver gets murdered in cold blood; the authorities arrive late but recover the victim; the perpetrators speed away unscathed.

Sadly, this is not a scene from a dystopian thriller—it is the reality facing a country that can’t quite get rid of the remnants of its shuttered offshore gaming industry.

The government, which once embraced Philippine offshore gaming operators (Pogos) with open arms, now finds itself ill-prepared and ill-equipped to track down the criminals they left behind. Deportation efforts are sluggish, law enforcement remains overwhelmed, and syndicates have moved on from online scams to more violent pursuits.

The latest case—a 14-year-old Chinese boy kidnapped and brutalized by his captors—lays bare the gruesome consequences of the government’s mismanagement of the Pogo exodus.

Based on reports, the victim was forcibly taken upon leaving the British School Manila and held for ransom. When his kidnappers grew impatient, they severed his finger and sent a video recording to his family as a warning. The boy’s Filipino driver, caught in the crossfire, was found dead the next day.

## ‘No Filipino mastermind’

Although the captors initially demanded $20 million, later lowered to $1 million, no ransom was paid for the release of the boy who was abandoned along a Parañaque City highway, according to Interior Secretary Jonvic Remulla. “We suspect that the victim’s family were former Pogo operators. We’re definite that the syndicate behind the kidnapping were also former Pogo operators,” he said.

“It’s foreigner against foreigner … There’s no Filipino mastermind behind this,” Remulla said.

By emphasizing that both the victim and the suspects are foreigners, the interior chief seems to believe it absolves the government of responsibility. Never mind that it happened on Philippine soil, facilitated by criminal networks that took root under the government’s watch.

In fact, the illusion that these crimes are self-contained ignores the very real danger they pose to Filipino communities.

In 2016, the Duterte administration, intent on pursuing warmer relations with China, allowed Chinese-run Pogos to flourish with minimal oversight. For years, these operations raked in billions, employing thousands of Chinese and other nationals while operating in a murky legal environment. When reports of Pogo-related crimes surfaced, the government responded with half-measures—occasionally shutting down a few errant operators but never addressing the root of the problem.

## Painfully slow

By the time the Marcos administration moved to ban offshore gaming operations last year, the damage had been done. If anything, the abrupt crackdown only succeeded in scattering the criminals and pushing them deeper underground, allowing them to regroup and diversify their operations. Now, instead of cyber fraud, these groups have turned to brutal crimes targeting their own compatriots.

The Philippine National Police and the Bureau of Immigration (BI), both tasked with rounding up and deporting undocumented foreign nationals, have proved painfully slow in fulfilling that role.

Since the start of 2025, authorities have apprehended some 500 foreign nationals linked to illegal Pogo activities in operations across Parañaque and Pasay cities in Metro Manila and Cavite province. But these arrests are a drop in the bucket of foreigners now deemed “illegal aliens.”

In January, the BI said it was hunting down “over 11,000” overstaying foreign nationals. Last week, the bureau said the number of unaccounted aliens was unchanged.

## Political will and decisive action

What makes this failure even more glaring is the government’s inability to fully enforce its own policies. Pogos may have been declared illegal, but the underground economy they created remains intact. Reports of illegal Pogo hubs operating in the outskirts of Metro Manila suggest that the industry has simply gone off-grid.

Or worse, as Sen. Risa Hontiveros noted, some Pogos have “reinvented” themselves into internet gambling companies sanctioned by the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp. (Pagcor). “This should be a wake-up call and to serve notice to Pagcor that they must not let these ‘reinvented Pogos’ find a space in casinos and those with junket agreements under its jurisdiction,” she said.

The government must hold accountable all public officials who enabled these syndicates to enter our country practically unhindered, opening a Pandora’s box of crime, human trafficking and money laundering. It must ramp up intelligence operations, strengthen cross-border cooperation with China, and fast-track the deportation of foreign criminals.

But without political will and decisive action, the authorities can expect these leftover Pogo networks to continue to flourish at the cost of more torn fingers and more lives lost, both foreign and Filipino.