# Saving Filipinos from scam hubs

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Many Filipinos, the majority of them poor and desperate, have fallen victim to human trafficking schemes for decades. From laborers to domestic and entertainment workers, the jobs have evolved with the times. Today, hundreds who are trafficked, lured by the prospect of high salaries and better lives, end up working in scam hubs in neighboring Southeast Asian countries.

Since the beginning of 2025, the government has repatriated 695 human trafficking victims, mostly from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. The biggest net was in March when 206 Filipinos were rescued in two batches from Myanmar. The victims were recruited through social media apps to work as call center agents and marketing officers in Thailand, only to end up in scam hubs in Myawaddy, Myanmar.

Last June, the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) released new information on the globalization of scam centers: victims from 66 countries have been trafficked into these scam hubs with no continent left untouched. It added that 74 percent of the victims were brought to hubs in Southeast Asia, with 90 percent of human trafficking facilitators identified as Asians.

“Initially concentrated in a handful of Southeast Asian countries, the centers are estimated to have drawn in hundreds of thousands of human trafficking victims, typically through false job ads, detaining them in compounds and forcing them to carry out online social engineering scams,” Interpol said.

## Desperation and poverty

It added that victims were held against their will and often subject to extortion through debt bondage, as well as beatings, sexual exploitation, torture, and rape.

A Filipino who fell victim told ABS-CBN in an interview last February that she was subjected to physical punishments every time she committed mistakes at work or failed to meet target revenues. Based on the information it gathered, the Bureau of Immigration (BI) stated that these victims must meet a quota of at least three clients per day. Their work includes investment scams through cryptocurrency and catfishing via dating sites

That Filipinos continue to be enticed to leave for jobs abroad only indicates the lack of suitable employment for them at home. This desperation and poverty, coupled with their English language skills, have made Filipinos not only the perfect recruits for these scam hubs but easy targets as well. By the time they realize they have been scammed, they are trapped—the promise of a salary as much as $1,000 (about P57,000) just an illusion. One of the victims said he only received the equivalent of P30,000 in monthly pay.

## ‘Backdoor exits’

Yet, despite these conditions, many Filipinos still choose to take the risk. According to Department of Justice (DOJ) spokesperson Mico Clavano, the country’s “porous borders” and its archipelagic nature make it more difficult for authorities to prevent human trafficking altogether. DOJ data show that aside from the international airports, victims are trafficked through “backdoor exits” such as Palawan, Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, and Zamboanga.

The immigration bureau said that behind these scam hubs in Myanmar are international syndicates with cross-border networks in Southeast Asia. It added that these scammers have taken advantage of the political instability in Myanmar, where most of the victims end up, making it more difficult to extend government intervention.

Last February, Thailand had to resort to cutting off the electricity, internet services, and fuel supplies to five towns in Myanmar along their border to pressure scam operators into releasing forced laborers.

On the part of the Philippines, it has formed the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking and maintained its Tier 1 status in the United States’ 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, signifying that the country fully meets the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking. The government is also planning more rescue missions due to the high number of victims in the Southeast Asian region.

## Scene of the crime

However, as Sen. Risa Hontiveros said, “The Bureau of Immigration should not be at the scene of the crime. It should be the last line of defense for our migrant workers.” She added that authorities should be more resolute in tracking down the syndicates behind human trafficking operations.

Last March, the BI announced that it had relieved seven of its personnel linked to trafficking. The government should not stop there. Aside from filing cases against them, it should use these personnel to dig deeper into the trafficking networks and break them down. It must also work with other countries and tighten borders and exit points.

More importantly, it must provide an environment where legitimate businesses can thrive and create more jobs domestically, so Filipinos wouldn’t be economically vulnerable and fall prey to traffickers. Because if there was a better opportunity at home, they wouldn’t even risk the danger of ending up in even worse situations than they were leaving behind.