

# UNODC joins regional crime fighters to tackle scams and human trafficking in SE Asia

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## FULL TEXT

M2 PRESSWIRE-September 27, 2023-UNODC joins regional crime fighters to tackle scams and human trafficking in SE Asia

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The focus of the plan is on criminal activity associated with casinos in the region, and other scams including money laundering and cybercrime.

The plan of action was announced in the Thai capital by officials from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) together with partner China, and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The new plan aims to strengthen prevention measures and improve the capacities of crime fighters to investigate international organised crime and human trafficking across the whole region. Crime 'mushrooming'

"Trafficking in persons connected to casinos and scam operations run by organized crime has mushroomed across Southeast Asia, particularly in the Mekong" remarked Jeremy Douglas, UNODC Regional Representative to Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

"There is an urgent need for regional cooperation to address these increasingly integrated and interlinked crimes in the region, as well as the ecosystem they exist in."

Human trafficking to recruit victims into criminal activity, is just one aspect of transnational organised crime, according to a policy report issued by UNODC.

It is often connected to the operations of border casinos, large scale money laundering, cybercrimes, and a range of other criminal offences. There have also been credible reports of torture and extortion in these operations over the past year, the report notes. Unprecedented profits

Profits from criminal gangs in the region have reached unprecedented levels, and illicit cash is increasingly being moved through the regional casino industry and other large cash flow businesses, including through a surge in the use of cryptocurrencies.

"Organized crime groups are converging in the region where they see vulnerabilities," Mr. Douglas commented.

UN News/Daniel Dickinson

A Thai navy launch patrols the Mekong River along the borders of Thailand with Laos and Myanmar.

He added that "operations against syndicates in some countries like the Philippines have caused a partial displacement, and we have seen criminals moving infrastructure into places where they see opportunity - basically where they expect they will be able to take advantage and not be held to account, to remote and border areas of the Mekong," he said.

According to the report, scammers operating in one southeast Asian country are estimated to be generating between \$7.5 and \$12.5 billion, or half the value of that country's GDP. No longer in the shadows

The report has found that, rather than operating in the shadows, transnational organised crime groups there can be remarkably open, in some cases presenting themselves as legitimate business entities or even philanthropic organisations.

Some organised crime chiefs have developed public alliances with influential business leaders and officials.

Co-chaired by the Philippines and UNODC, the new plan is finalised and will be tabled by the Philippines at the next

ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime.

"Addressing this issue in one or a few countries' domestic contexts, while necessary and welcome, will not have a significant impact," warned Rebecca Miller, UNODC Regional Advisor on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling. "The plan the region has agreed to, includes practical and targeted actions to address transnational crime comprehensively and strategically. Progress is being made, but more needs to be done and UNODC stands ready to support," she added.

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