

INTERPOL issues global warning on human trafficking-fueled fraud

7 June 2023

The scheme, where victims are trafficked to work in online scam centres, has shifted from regional crime trend to global threat.

SINGAPORE: For the past several years, INTERPOL has been closely observing a growing crime phenomenon: large-scale human trafficking where victims are lured through fake job ads to online scam centres and forced to commit cyber-enabled financial crime on an industrial scale.

The crime trend, which has seen tens of thousands trafficked in Southeast Asia and many more defrauded around the world, has attracted media attention and prompted government and civil society responses.

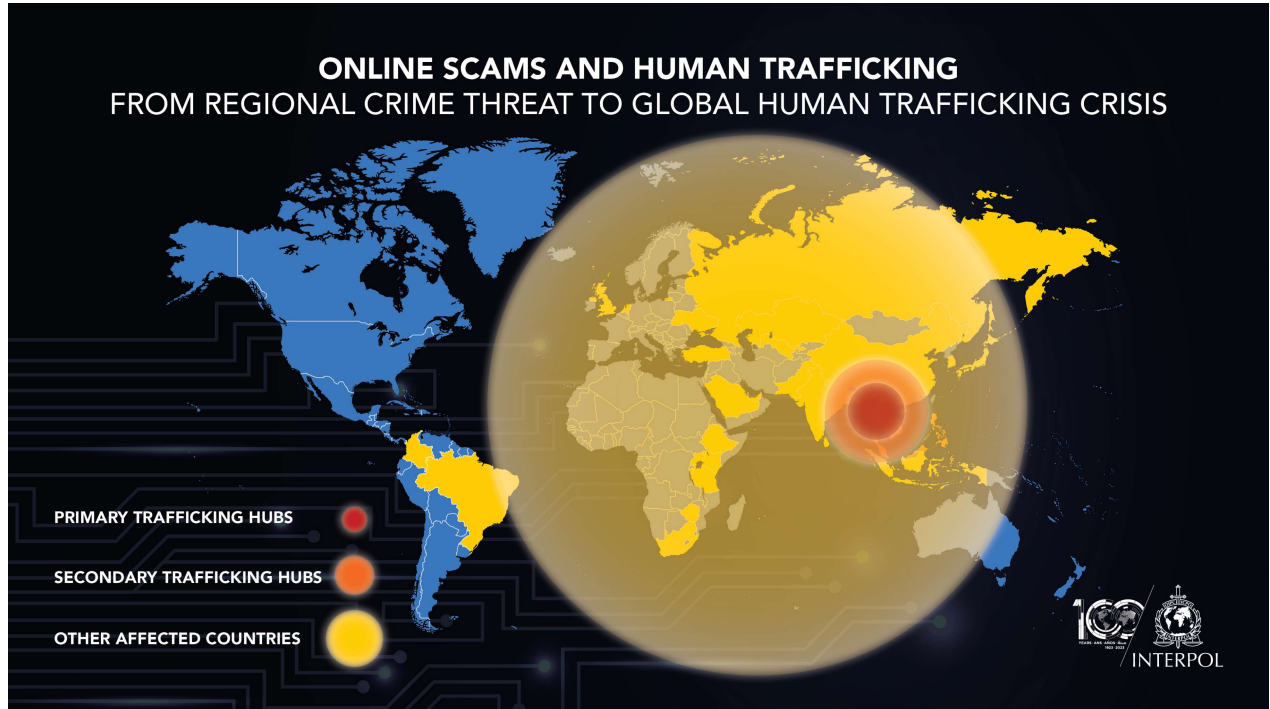
Nevertheless, new INTERPOL research warns that the Modus Operandi (MO) is escalating rapidly, taking on a new global dimension, and that the crime trend is likely much more entrenched than previously thought. The Organization has issued an Orange Notice to its membership on the trend – a global warning regarding a serious and imminent threat to public safety.

Initially, online scam centres were concentrated in Cambodia, with further trafficking hubs later identified in Laos and Myanmar. Today, trafficking hubs have been identified in at least four more Asian countries, and there is evidence that the MO is being replicated in other regions such as West Africa, where cyber-enabled financial crime is already prevalent.

Likewise, the geographical diversity of both sets of victims has also dramatically increased. While initial human trafficking victims were Chinese-speaking, drawn from China, Malaysia, Thailand or Singapore, victims have since been trafficked to the region from as far afield as South America, East Africa and Western Europe.

“What began as a regional crime threat has become a global human trafficking crisis,” said Jürgen Stock, INTERPOL Secretary General.

“Just about anyone in the world could fall victim to either the human trafficking or the online scams carried out through these criminal hubs. Much stronger international police cooperation is needed to stop this crime trend from spreading further.”



Double-edged crime threat

The reports first emerged throughout 2021. Criminal groups posted false promises of lucrative job opportunities on social networks and recruitment sites, only to kidnap and detain the unsuspecting applicants in inhuman living conditions while engaging the victims in forced criminality, mainly online fraud.

The online scam centres represent a double-edged crime threat, exploiting two sets of victims. On the one side, victims drawn into the human trafficking schemes are subject to forced labour and often extortion through a type of debt bondage, as well as beatings, sexual exploitation, torture, rape and even alleged organ harvesting in some cases.

On the other side, the trafficked workers are used to perpetrate a range of online fraud on a second set of victims, increasingly scattered around the world. The schemes include investment fraud, romance scams and frauds linked to cryptocurrency investing and online gambling.

ONLINE SCAMS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING A DOUBLE-EDGED CRIME THREAT WITH TWO TYPES OF VICTIMS



INTERPOL's March 2022 [Operation Storm Makers](#), targeting human trafficking and migrant smuggling, resulted in further information on this growing trend. The operation led INTERPOL to issue a Purple Notice – a global police alert detailing new criminal modi operandi – entitled 'Social media recruitment for forced labour in Southeast Asia'.

The scale of the trafficking, and its particular nexus with cyber fraud, have been unprecedented, exploiting specific vulnerabilities of the post-pandemic landscape.

COVID-19 widened the victim pools on both sides of the online scam centre trend. Online fraud has increased sharply as digitalization rates were pushed upwards during pandemic lockdowns, forcing most professional and personal activities performed almost exclusively online.

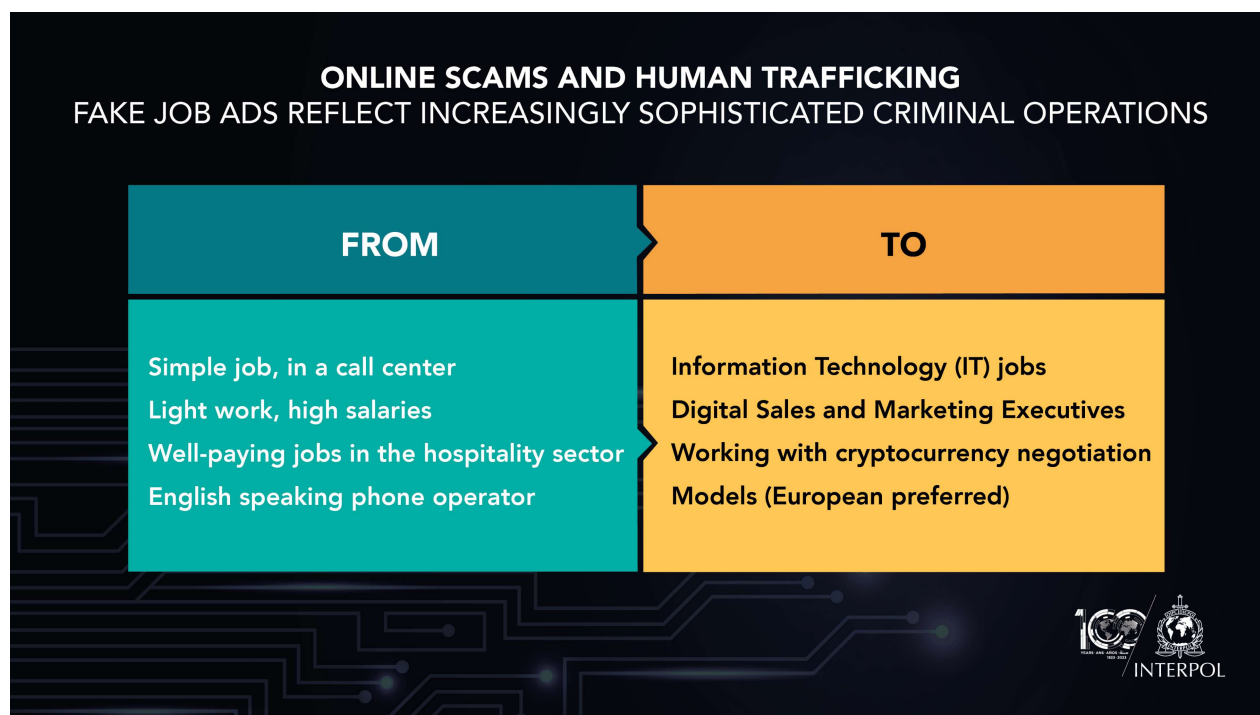
At the same time, the pandemic rendered many workers jobless and increasingly desperate for professional opportunities.

Global footprint

As the diversity of the trafficking victims has increased, so has the geographical diversity of online scam victims targeted, as the former bring in new languages and cultural awareness that can be exploited by criminal operators. Online fraud victims targeted by the centres were initially mainly of Chinese origin, yet are increasingly located in North America, Europe and other parts of Asia.

In parallel, the sophistication of the scam centres has also increased. An analysis of the job titles mentioned in fake work ads shows an evolution from basic requirements – "simple job in a call centre"; "phone operator" – to

more skilled profiles, such as information technology workers or “digital sales executives”.



Recent developments in artificial intelligence and large language models like ChatGPT are also reportedly being leveraged by the online scam centres. At the same time, language translation software is used to target victims in countries not represented by trafficked workers.

Intelligence exchange

To address this increasingly global threat, INTERPOL is calling for greater intelligence exchange between law enforcement, non-governmental organizations, financial intelligence units and relevant private sector companies to support the rescue of trafficking victims and dismantle the money laundering activities that facilitate these activities.

“In the past year, INTERPOL has supported member countries in cases relating to hundreds of human trafficking victims,” said Isaac Espinosa, Acting Coordinator of INTERPOL’s Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling unit.

“Thousands of people around the world continue to fall victim to these organized crime groups and a new piece of intelligence – on trafficking routes, financial transfers or criminal techniques – could prevent an individual from losing their life savings or rescue another from horrific exploitation.”

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