This second IOM regional situation analysis on trafficking in persons (TiP) for forced criminality (FC) in Southeast Asia’s online scamming centres offers practitioners, policymakers and the donor community a concise overview of counter-trafficking initiatives. It encompasses IOM’s key figures, achievements, prominent press coverage and publications from the year of 2023, accompanied by recommendations for 2024.
### MODUS OPERANDI

Infographic from IOM’s Situation Analysis on Trafficking in Persons for the Purpose of Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia (March 2023):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>MEANS</th>
<th>PURPOSE OF EXPLOITATION</th>
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| Recruitment               | • Combination of online job offers posted on social media and in-person recruitment by agents in the countries of origin.  
                          | • Recruitment is mostly free of charge for the victims.              | Forced Labour                                               |
|                           |                                                                        | • Excessive working hours for little or no pay, with minimum break. |
|                           |                                                                        | • Salary deductions if the assigned work quotas are not met or as punishment for violating regulations. |
| Transportation            | • The travel fees tend to be arranged and paid by traffickers.         | Criminal Activities                                         |
|                           | • Traffickers usually support the issuance of victims’ travel documents, including tourist visa applications. | • Scam centres involved in online gambling, cryptocurrency, online money lending, and romance applications. |
|                           | • For land bordercrossing, transporters are normally residents of bordering communes who receive small fees and are unaware of their role in human trafficking. | Slavery and Slavery-like Practices                         |
|                           | • Victims usually move in small groups before being slowly split up throughout the different legs of the journey. | • Successive sales of victims between companies. |
| Harboring                 | • Guarded compounds that operate as online scamming centres.           |                      Debt bondage: victims are asked to pay money for their release and the fee for recruitment, food, and accommodation. |
| Transfer and Receipt      | • Several changes of hands in the process: recruiters hand victims over to smuggling agents to cross borders, traffickers then receive the victims at the border, before being rewarded by the employers. |                       Victim of trafficking’s (VOT) families are sometimes extorted for ransom. |
|                           |                                                                        | Sexual Exploitation                                         |
|                           |                                                                        | • Entertainment industries surrounding and inside of online scam centres. |
|                           |                                                                        | Organ Removal                                               |
|                           |                                                                        | • Scam centres involved in online gambling, cryptocurrency, online money lending, and romance applications. |
|                           |                                                                        | • Scam centres involved in online gambling, cryptocurrency, online money lending, and romance applications. |
|                           |                                                                        | • Scam centres involved in online gambling, cryptocurrency, online money lending, and romance applications. |

Following IOM’s 2022 Situation Analysis on TIP for FC in Southeast Asia, significant progress has been made in understanding traffickers’ modus operandi, notably through UNODC’s Key Indicators of TIP for FC to Commit Cyber Enabled Crimes, developed with IOM’s input. One specific example outlined in the report is how traffickers often issue employment contracts to deceive the victims and trick the authorities into legitimizing their illegal operations. The presence of a contract does not mean that a person has not been trafficked. In fact, it signifies a physical manifestation of various means used to traffick a person for exploitation.
Disclaimer: Figures provided below cover caseload related to TiP for FC of the seven most affected IOM country offices in the region, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. The data communicated below is based on IOM’s internal operations and does not accurately represent the full scale of TiP for FC in the region, which is likely to be of far greater magnitude.

Comparative Analysis of 2022 and 2023


Higher proportion of cases referred by governments: The proportion of government-referred cases has increased by 19%, compared to 2022, while the proportion of NGO referrals has decreased by 10%.

Moderate increase of male cases: 8% rise in the proportion of male cases.

IOM VoT Case Management now mainly directed towards TiP for FC: in 2022, 36% of IOM’s total VoTs caseload is related to exploitation in online scamming centres based in Southeast Asia, vs. 70% in 2023.

Decline in the educational levels and linguistic skills of victims

Mainly Young Men Referred by Governments

¾ of IOM’s caseload are males.

Profile of Victims

+ 90% are 18-35 years old

50% secondary, 50% higher education completion

Majority are multilingual
Predominantly from South and Southeast Asia

Top 5 countries of origin and destination of IOM-assisted individuals, in 2023

1. Cambodia
2. The Philippines
3. Sri Lanka
4. Nepal
5. Myanmar

Countries of origin of IOM-assisted individuals
Countries of destination of IOM-assisted individuals
Countries of transit and origin of IOM-assisted individuals

Disclaimer: These maps are for illustration purposes. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.
I spent a month in the compound, grappling with depression, hopelessness and isolation, forced to exploit individuals and scam them out of their life savings.

Nasim*, a 20-year-old university graduate, fluent in both English and Chinese, found himself in a harrowing situation after the unfortunate wave of job losses hit Dubai, where he has been working for years. Nasim was seeking job opportunities without considering the potential risks.

Successfully securing a job in Mae Sot, he later met an agent who promised him a well-paying opportunity in Chiang Rai, Thailand. “During our journey, we crossed a river, and my concerns grew. Despite the reassurance from the agent, my fears materialized when, after a seemingly endless drive, the car abruptly stopped, and I was forced out of the car, and instructed to cross the river with a Chinese girl.”

Realizing that he had been trafficked into a scam compound, for two weeks, Nasim constantly faced threats and endured the stress of being hung by his hands until he succumbed to scamming others. “I spent a month in the compound, grappling with depression, hopelessness and isolation, forced to exploit individuals and scam them out of their life savings.”

Yearning to escape, one day, Nasim made up a story about a severe toothache, convincing the person in charge of the centre that he needed urgent surgery. “My supervisor then arranged for the driver to take me to a dentist. At the dentist’s office, I confided in them, seeking their help. After pretending to undergo an operation, I seized my chance and jumped out of the car. At that time, I had been in contact with a local NGO for about 10 days. After my escape, I ran into a family, from where I urgently contacted the staff of the local NGO, who swiftly came to my rescue.”

With the help from the NGO and IOM, Nasim was provided safe shelter, where his wounds and traumas were properly treated. Due to lacking a valid travel document, Nasim contacted the authorities, and following a legal process, was sentenced to six months of imprisonment before being eventually granted a pardon.

“I returned to my country of origin with the support of IOM and was provided with reintegration support to restart my life.”

*Names changed to protect identity
They even threatened to sell me to an organ harvesting syndicate.

By all accounts, conditions in the centres are brutal.

Sinta*, was also promised a good job opportunity by a friend. Not being able to speak English, however, made reaching her targets a herculean task. “They kept reducing my salary when I could not reach my targets”, she says. “When I asked how I could go home, they said I had to pay back 200 million rupiah [approximately USD 13,400]. They even threatened to sell me to an organ harvesting syndicate.”

No longer able to tolerate the conditions, a group of Indonesians decided to ‘go on strike’, resulting in them being locked up in a room for two weeks. As luck would have it, one member of the group who had secretly kept a second phone, recorded a video of their situation and published it online. The video went viral in Indonesia, gaining the attention of authorities at the highest level. With so much publicity, the traffickers deemed the group too big of a risk to keep, eventually releasing them back into Thailand.

After receiving initial support from a local organization along the border, the group was referred to the Indonesian Embassy. At the embassy’s request, IOM provided the group of 26 with food, accommodation, legal counselling and interpretation support during their weeks-long stay in Bangkok, before returning home.

“Because this emerging trafficking trend is so complex, protecting victims effectively requires strong coordination. IOM works closely with the national and provincial authorities, civil society and embassies to provide assistance when needed,” explains Géraldine Ansart, IOM Thailand’s Chief of Mission.

“Moreover, one of our priorities is to enhance capacities to accurately identify trafficking cases,” Ansart adds. “IOM supported the government last year to establish the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) on Protection and Assistance of Victims of Trafficking – a new national policy framework that stipulates roles and responsibilities in victim screening, identification, assistance and referral – and sensitized over 2,300 frontline officials on the framework.”

Without rigorous screening measures, victims can fall through the cracks, decreasing the chances of better understanding of the situation and preventing others from being trafficked.

Full story available at: https://thailand.iom.int/stories/forced-crime-trafficking-survivors-thailand-tell-their-stories

*Names changed to protect identity
Regional: During the post-border openings and economic recovery period following the pandemic of COVID19, Southeast Asia saw in 2023 a surge in digital activities. However, this economic growth also fueled criminal operations, particularly online scams. Syndicates, using online tools for recruitment of victims and their operations, expanded across the region, generating estimated profits of 7.5 to 12.5 billion USD. Skilled and semi-skilled workers, still recovering from the impacts of the pandemic, were prime targets for scams promising lucrative employment opportunities abroad. Governments in the region responded to such a surge of criminality with measures such as revising national referral mechanisms and conducting operations to crack down on scam centres, as well as raising awareness on TIP and safe migration. Travel advisories towards countries with known scam operations were also put in place.

Yearly Highlight

ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by The Abuse of Technology

The 42nd ASEAN Summit raised the profile of the trafficking for forced criminality issue as leaders unanimously approved the Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by The Abuse of Technology. The declaration was particularly timely for ASEAN, given that, in 2023, three key countries of origin for victims of trafficking in online scams (Viet Nam, Indonesia and Myanmar) and the top five countries of exploitation or transit (Cambodia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Thailand) are its member states. Even though the declaration remains a non-binding instrument and needs to be more concretely incorporated into national legislative schemes, it represents a shift towards greater recognition of TIP for FC, a noteworthy accomplishment considering ongoing debates on TIP classification, and proposes various regional initiatives.

Content

- Implementation of existing ASEAN instruments, such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons
- Partnerships with the private sector, civil society organizations and academia to foster innovative solutions and develop preventive measures.
- Mutual legal assistance in TIP cases through the effective implementation of ASEAN Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters
- Setting a minimum standard of protection at the regional level for a VOT
- Development of a regional referral mechanism through leveraging existing ASEAN mechanisms to avoid re-victimization, retraumatisation and continuing exploitation of victims.
In 2023, numerous regional events have supported collaboration among countries, while a growing body of publications seek to shed light on the issue, ensuring a broader global understanding.

**Map of Key Events in the Region**

- **Bali Process’ small group experts’ discussion on online scams**
  - Experts gathered to enhance Bali Process mechanisms to support member states. IOM highlighted issues to be addressed, such as victim mischaracterization, urging more active policy dialogue, legal reforms and national capacity building.

- **Bali Process Thematic Dialogue on Preventing and Responding to Online Scam Enterprise**
  - A diverse assembly of Bali Process members, law enforcement, civil society and technology companies provided a nuanced understanding of challenges and comprehensive solutions.

- **10th ASEAN CTIP Partners Coordination meeting**
  - Quarterly meeting to promote collaboration among Bangkok-based counter-trafficking programmes. During the event, IOM presented contemporary trends on the issue, including the profiles of victims and the development of trafficking routes.

- **Release of Trapped in Decades: Responding to the Trafficking in Persons Fueling the Expansion of Southeast Asia’s Online Scam Centres**
  - The Bali Process RSO issued a policy brief outlining the emergence and transformation of online scam centres into substantial revenue sources for organized crime, highlighting the dire circumstances of VOTL.

- **8th Senior Officials Meeting of the Bali Process**
  - Introduced the 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation, in which the first area of cooperation addresses law enforcement’s efforts on TFIP, including online scams.

- **INTERPOL issues global warning on human trafficking-fueled fraud**
  - INTERPOL released an Orange Notice, signaling a “serious and imminent threat to public safety.” The Organization urged enhanced intelligence sharing schemes among law enforcement, NGOs, financial intelligence units and the private sector.

- **ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by The Abuse of Technology**
  - A declaration issued at the 18th ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh.

- **Release of the U.S. Department of State 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report**
  - The 2023 report identified cyber scam operations as increasingly perpetuated and discussed it as a “Topic of Special Interest.”

- **ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC)**
  - SOMTC concluded “The Regional Cooperation Roadmap to address Transnational Organized Crime and Trafficking in Persons Associated with Casinos and Scam Operations in Southeast Asia.”

- **ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights Consultation on Human Rights Referral Systems for Gender-Based Violence and Trafficking in Persons**
  - Participants discussed referral systems, challenges and innovations in rescuing, screening and safeguarding VOTL from technology misuse. IOM Regional Director, Sarah Lou Yamali Anitola, emphasized the importance of a survivor-centred approach that prioritizes survivors’ voices for law enforcement investigations and long-term well-being.

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**Operations (Interpol, joint operations)**

**Bali Process**

**United Nations**

**ASEAN Events**

**Others**
Release of the report by Tomoya Obokata, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, titled “The use of technology in facilitating and preventing contemporary forms of slavery.”

The report highlights online scam centres in Southeast Asia, identifying digital tools that help prevent exploitative practices. It outlines pertinent challenges and concludes with recommendations for effective prevention measures.

Adoption of the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons 2023–2028

The Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0 incorporates targeted various activities, including researches on emerging trends in online scam centres and workshops for law enforcement units to share good practices.

ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime

The meeting adopted the significant documents, including the ASEAN Statement on Enhancing Cooperation in Protecting and Supporting Witnesses and Victims of Transnational Crimes, as well as the Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0.

Joint Operations announced between Myanmar and China in Wa State

Joint operations between China and the United Wa State Army captured 1207 suspects and 41 fugitives according to Xinhua news agency.

Release of OHCHR report titled “Online Scam Operations and Trafficking into Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia: Recommendations for a Human Rights Response”

OHCHR’s briefing paper outlines human rights concerns and underscores the cross-border nature of these challenges, emphasizing the imperative for an orchestrated global response.

Release of UNODC’s strategic plan and report titled “Casinos, cyber fraud, and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia”

UNODC, ASEAN and People’s Republic of China finalized a strategic plan to combat transnational crime in FC in casinos and online scams. The policy report offers insights on profits from criminal operations through online scams, highlighting their disguise as legitimate or philanthropic organizations. UNODC also released key indicators across the categories of “Act, Means, and Exploitation.”

INTERPOL Operation Storm Makers II

From 16-20 October 2023, the operation mobilized law enforcement in 27 countries, carrying out 270,000 inspections and police checks at 450 human trafficking hotspots, arresting 281 suspects and resuing 149 VOTs. IOM is the referral entity for VOTs identified by INTERPOL.

Dissemination Forum for the ASEAN Multi-sectoral workplan against Trafficking in Persons Work Plan 2023–2028

Bohol TIP Workplan 2.0 includes activities on TIP cases related to online scams and fraud in the region, under the coordination of SOMHTC (Priority C.3.2).

5th Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking-(COMMIT) Senior Official Meeting

COMMIT addressed issues regarding the Transnational Referral Mechanism and emphasized the importance of addressing cooperation challenges, particularly those related to technology abuse.

US, UK and Canada Sanctions Target Southeast Asian Scam Operations

The three countries imposed coordinated sanctions against 14 individuals and entities for their involvement in online scamming industry in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.
Victim Profile:
Compounds in Cambodia are found in major cities and along the borders.
- Predominantly male workers
- Primarily monolingual with incomplete secondary education

Prevention, Protection and Prosecution:
- Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC)’s commitment to ousting all forms of TiP in Cambodia, including TiP for FC, by Prime Minister, Samdech Moha Borvov Thipadei Hun Manet.
- To effectively address this challenge, the General Secretariat of the National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT) and other RGC ministries, including the NCCT members, work together to improve victim identification and referral, as well as rescue efforts and prosecution of perpetrators.
- RGC’s rollout of training on victim identification across the country, in partnership with UN agencies and international organizations and with the support of the NCCT.
- Finalization of the National Referral Mechanism for VOTs.

IOM Cambodia Key Achievements:
- Received direct referrals from RGC, UN, embassies and civil society.

Note: IOM’s funding constraints and stretched resources impede embassies’ support for repatriation services.

Trafficking Routes:

Disclaimer: These maps are for illustration purposes. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.
IOM’s Situation Report | February 2024

Victim Profile:
- Mainly in their twenties with completed secondary education, bilingual
- Trafficked to Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand.

Protection:
- From January to November 2023, 3,239 Indonesians were rescued from online scam centres, mainly located in Cambodia, with 1,132 identified as VoTs.
- Presidential Regulation 49 (2023) on the comprehensive interagency coordination framework restructured the leadership of the Task Force for the Prevention and Handling of Human Trafficking. The Ministry of Political, Legal, and Security Affairs is the primary coordinator, and the task force is chaired by the Indonesian National Police. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is committed to various services, including supporting rescue operations, identifying potential trafficking victims, and facilitating reintegration support. The Indonesian Government has contributed IDR 11 billion throughout 2022 and 2023 for these operations.
- High-level meeting between the Indonesian Foreign Minister, the Head of Cambodian National Police and the Cambodian Minister of Internal Affairs for a swift response in handling Indonesians cases.
- In August 2023, the Indonesian Police collaborated with their Chinese counterparts to crack down on an online romance scamming operation in Batam, Riau Islands Province, resulting in the apprehension of 88 Chinese nationals, including five women who were sexually exploited to lure and extort victims in People’s Republic of China.

IOM Indonesia Key Achievements:
- Directly assisted the victims.
- Conducted technical trainings for Indonesian diplomats on identification of TIP in online scam activities.
- Hosted a coordination meeting with local government, NGOs, universities, and community members to harness public discussion.
- Premiered “Through the Screen,” a film portraying victims’ trafficking journey to effectively raise awareness.

Trafficking Routes:

Disclaimer: These maps are for illustration purposes. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.
**Victim Profile:**

- Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in northern Bokeo Province has become a focal point, hosting over 32 trafficked foreign nationalities. The SEZ is featured with extensive infrastructure development, including an international airport. Attracts mostly undocumented migrant workers, especially from Myanmar.
- Typically, victims are male workers in their twenties with completed secondary education, proficient in varying levels of English and their mother tongue.

**Prevention:**

- In mid-2023, the Lao People's Democratic Republic approved task force units within the SEZ, represented by relevant Ministries, including the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit under the Ministry of Public Security.
- Government initiatives involve strategic partnerships to boost awareness among migrant workers.
- The revision and production of training manuals aim to enhance the capacity of investigation officials.
- Coordination mechanisms are being established between central, provincial, and district levels, with a focus on capacity-building at the provincial and district levels due to the SEZ’s limited jurisdiction.

**Protection:**

- The task force adopts a comprehensive approach, ensuring migrant workers’ fundamental rights, facilitating conflict resolution, improving social welfare, addressing contractual situations, and managing migration status.
- These initiatives include:
  - migration-based complaints mechanism
  - detailed employment contracts
  - migrant workers’ database in the SEZ.

**Prosecution:**

- In September 2023, Lao People’s Democratic Republic deported 164 Chinese individuals who were arrested for various offenses within the SEZ.

**IOM Lao People’s Democratic Republic Key Achievements:**

- Assisted VoTs in online scamming at the SEZ, providing repatriation support to 49 victims from 6 different countries, a key priority for Lao People’s Democratic Republic.
- Promoted the newly created Manual on Interview Skills and Testimony of participants in TIP cases (2023), along with the Reintegration Handbook for VoTs in Lao PDR (2023).
- Co-chairs the National Anti-Human Trafficking Working Group meetings, addressing changing trends in TIP and way forward.
- Continued capacity-building efforts for law enforcement officers on the 2018 Lao Penal Code and 2019 Laws on Criminal Procedures, emphasizing the application of the Manual on Interview Skills and Testimony of participants in TIP cases.

**Trafficking Routes:**

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Victim Profile:

- The situation involves an estimated 120,000 or more individuals, including foreign nationals and Myanmar citizens, who have been potentially trafficked into scam compounds, primarily in border areas with People’s Republic of China and Thailand.
- Victims assisted by IOM Myanmar are predominantly men between the ages of 18-35.

Protection:

- Law enforcement operations - particularly those led by People’s Republic of China - have rescued and apprehended thousands of Chinese nationals and perpetrators respectively.
- Armed offensive carried out by the “Brotherhood Alliance” in Northern Shan, which has expressed its intention to shut down scam compounds, has further disrupted scam operations in Northern Myanmar, particularly in areas bordering People’s Republic of China. Repatriations of thousands of individuals took place in the latter months of 2023, coordinated directly through Government-to-Government channels, particularly with Governments in the region.
- However, scam centres operations reportedly continue largely unabated in Tachileik, Shan State, and Myawaddy, Kayin State.

IOM Myanmar Key Achievements:

- Strengthened its efforts in support of embassies/diplomatic missions when their nationals are caught up in the scam compounds in situations of potential TIP. This has included development of technical guidance and FAQs on reporting and responding to cases of potential trafficking in the scam compounds.
- Facilitated the delivery of training on responding to TIP and trauma-informed care; and sharing of information, lessons learned and good practices in protecting affected nationals.
- Continues to coordinate efforts through chairing of the Human Trafficking Working Group in Myanmar and coordinating with related protection and human rights mechanisms of the UN and civil society.
- Continues efforts, where feasible, to advocate with all relevant stakeholders and stakeholders for a rights-based, victim-centred response.
- IOM’s caseload has increased in 2023, from a total of 138 victims identified and assisted in 2022, to a total of 517 in 2023, representing a 275% increase, with 33% of these victims trafficked for FC in scam compounds.
- Worked with partners in providing needed assistance to victims, including safe shelter, food, counselling and trauma support, medical care and assisted voluntary return and reintegration.

Trafficking Routes:

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Victim Profile:
- Generally, victims are in their twenties, with completed secondary education and varied levels of English proficiency alongside their mother tongue.
- From as many as 19 countries.
- A significant portion of victims in IOM Thailand’s caseload were traveling abroad and entering employment for the first time.
- Majority of victims assisted in Thailand were trafficked and exploited in Myanmar.

Prevention:
- Concrete commitments with embassies have been forged to develop a consular guide, Frequently Asked Questions on the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), and the creation of Information, Education, and Communication materials.

Protection:
- Thailand has implemented measures for identification and protection of VOTs, implementing the non-punishment principle by waiving immigration penalties and ensuring that VOTs are provided with shelters offering medical and pre-departure assistance.
- Thailand has streamlined its immigration procedures, expediting immigration clearances on an exceptional basis for urgent cases requiring VOT assistance and protection.
- The Royal Thai government has continued to prioritize the implementation of the NRM at the provincial levels, and also initiated the revision of the anti-TIP law to ensure the inclusion of stronger victim protection principles.

Prosecution:
- IOM has collaborated with the RTG to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to enhance screening and identification procedures.
- The Royal Thai Police have initiated crackdowns on potential trafficking syndicates, fostering multilateral meetings with neighbouring countries to enhance cross-border cooperation.

IOM Thailand Key Achievements:
- Assisted 193 VOTs, with 73% of these victims coerced into FC.
- IOM has continued to support coordination efforts between embassies and consular officials as well as the Royal Thai Government, to support screening and identification efforts, as well as the provision of repatriation and protection support.
- Formed an informal coordination group between IOM, NGOs, and the Royal Thai Government, the Joint Cyber-Slavery Task Force for collaboration and coordination.
- IOM continued to support coordination and referral efforts through facilitating the Mae Sot Anti-Trafficking Committee comprising of key NGOs and CSOs.

Trafficking Routes:

Disclaimer: These maps are for illustration purposes. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.
Country of destination and origin

**Victim Profile:**
- Victims are generally in their twenties, bilingual, and have completed higher education, with some possessing master’s degrees.
- Notably, the Philippines is considered as both country of origin and destination, primarily from Asia, but with smaller numbers from Middle East and North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.
- It is worth mentioning that some individuals have been either transferred or threatened to be transferred from one hub to another within the Philippines and across borders.

**Prevention:**
- The Department of Migrant Workers issued an advisory in January, cautioning against illegal recruiters or human traffickers offering fictitious jobs as customer service representatives in Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, or Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

**Protection:**
- In 2023, Government authorities conducted large-scale operations on online gaming facilities used as fronts for online scamming hubs, resulting in the release of over 3,000 individuals – both foreign born and Filipino workers. In the first major operation at Clark in May 2023, the 1,063 foreign nationals were treated as VOTs and repatriated without immigration violations under Allow Departure Orders. Following by various rescue operations: Las Pinas City in June (2,714 individuals) and Pasay City in August (650 individuals).
- In November 2023, more than 30 foreign victims were intercepted at the airport, travelling from Manila to Cebu, as authorities found that these hubs were moving to the provinces to escape detection in Metro Manila.
- The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), and Department of Social Welfare and Development provide support, including repatriation, livelihood assistance and psychosocial counselling to identified victims.

**IOM Philippines Key Achievements:**
- Actively monitors the situation, providing support to 276 personnel, identifying 190 as VOTs, and repatriating 75 foreign nationals.
- Since 2022, over 400 Filipino VOTs have been repatriated by DFA/DMW from Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and Myanmar (37%, 14%, 49% respectively). The Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking has convened a new Technical Working Group (TWG) specifically focusing on FC as an emerging trend. This TWG is co-chaired by IOM Philippines and the Philippine National Police-Anti-Cybercrime Group.
- The Senate is conducting inquiries for legislative purposes on the recent scam operations, with IOM participating as a resource speaker.

**Trafficking Routes:**

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Victim Profile:

- In 2023, victims are generally in their 20s, monolingual workers with low to medium education levels, most of which finished secondary education.

Prevention:

- In June-July 2023, the Ministry of Information and Communications led a national campaign to heighten awareness about identifying and preventing online scams.
- Vietnamese embassies actively collaborate with local authorities to clarify information, strengthen inspections of labor-employing establishments, and prevent illegal immigration.
- The Ministry of Public Security proactively monitors closed Facebook groups and other social media for suspicious behavior, increasing border patrols to intercept potential victims.

Protection:

- In the first half of 2023, Vietnamese victim returns decreased overall, except for a significant rise from the Philippines (600+) and Thailand as a transit country.
- The latest rescue operation in October 2023 involved 166 individuals on the northern Myanmar border. Despite risks, individuals continue migrating through irregular routes. Responding to this, dedicated hotlines for citizen protection have been promoted, improving screening mechanisms, enhance referral capacity, and connect victims with corresponding services. IOM supports these efforts through online and offline channels.
- Inter-agency collaboration has been strengthened, focusing on Cambodia for prompt verification and assistance. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Vietnamese representative agencies in Cambodia coordinate with local authorities to verify cases and deploy measures to protect and rescue citizens victimized by online scams.

Prosecution:

- With technical and advisory support from IOM, the government is considering the inclusion of cybercrime and support for victims in the revised TIP law.
- IOM has further sought to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute, helping the centralization of TIP data, and providing evidence and testimony to support victim identification and trafficker prosecution.

IOM Viet Nam Key Achievements:

- Due to the absence of an official government support scheme for returnees not officially identified as VOTs, IOM Viet Nam plays a crucial role in referring and coordinating collective support between the Government and NGOs through its chairmanship of the Reintegration Network.
- Collaborated with the MOFA to develop a feasibility study for an interagency mechanism to protect Vietnamese in countries in crisis, including potential VOTs.
- Supports prevention efforts through the use of social media and conducting and public outreach to raise awareness.

Trafficking Routes:

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MEDIA AND PUBLICATIONS

The media already shed light on the emergence and scale of TiP for FC in Southeast Asia in 2022. In 2023, it continued to inform the public of the nature of this transnational crime as well as contributed to keeping it on the political agenda. Below are a few TiP cases from the region that made local and international news.

**Cambodia** | Victims Sent to Hospital for Organ Removal in Cambodia
---|---
**Source:** Khmer Times / July 26, 2023

**Indonesia** | Justice After Exploitation
---|---
**Source:** Channels News Asia / April 19, 2023

**Viet Nam** | Rescue Operations See Vietnamese Victims Return From Philippines and Cambodia.
---|---
**Source:** Khmer Times / July 31, 2023

**Myanmar** | The Dark Reality of The Fraud Industry in Myanmar
---|---
**Source:** The Paper, Sixth Tone / August 30, 2023

**Myanmar** | The Dark Reality of Telecom Fraud in Northern Myanmar
---|---
**Source:** The Paper, Sixth Tone / August 30, 2023

**Lao People’s Democratic Republic** | Authorities Deport Alleged Traffickers and Take Down Fraud Ring in the SEZ.
---|---
**Source:** Radio Free Asia Lao / September 13, 2023

**Philippines** | Thousands of Victims Rescued in Operations in Clark and Las Pinas
---|---
**Source:** Rappler / May 05, 2023

**Global** | Nightmare of Trafficking for Forced Criminality.
---|---
**Source:** New York Times / December 17, 2023

**Pagcor orders shutdown of Las Piñas-based Pogo hub**
---|---
**Source:** The Philippine Daily Inquirer / July 08, 2023

**Thailand** | Anti-online Scam Centre Launched to Tackle Thailand’s “Scamdemic”
---|---
**Source:** Bangkok Post / October 28, 2023

**Anti-online Scam Centre gets off the ground**
---|---
**Source:** The Nation / November 02, 2023

**7 Months Inside an Online Scam Labor Camp**
---|---
**Source:** Time / December 14, 2023
Key Publications


RECOMMENDATIONS ON VICTIMS' PROTECTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identification and Screening</strong></td>
<td><strong>For Law Enforcement:</strong> Training on all forms of trafficking, especially TIP for FC, for frontline officers responsible for VOT identification.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>For Governments and Law Enforcement:</strong> Compliance with the Palermo Protocol, identifying victims based on “Acts, Means, and Purpose.” Article 3(b) underscores that the consent of a victim to the intended exploitation is irrelevant when any of the means outlined in subparagraph (a) have been employed.</td>
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<td><strong>For Governments:</strong> Legal revisions extending support to individuals in the process of victim identification.</td>
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<td><strong>For Governments and CSOs:</strong> Campaign rollout to increase awareness and understanding of TIP for FC of the groups at risk and prevent revictimization.</td>
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<td><strong>How can IOM support?</strong></td>
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<td>Development and facilitation of training sessions on timely, accurate and trauma-informed VOT identification.</td>
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<td>Protection-sensitive information-sharing on TIP cases with law enforcement and NRM authorities, to provide context to VOT screening.</td>
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<td>Dialogue facilitation with stakeholders, sharing insights to raise awareness and understanding of TIP for FC.</td>
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<td><strong>Protection Gaps</strong></td>
<td><strong>For Governments and Judiciary Authorities:</strong> Full implementation of the Non-Punishment Principle (add an asterisk to explain the Non-Punishment Principle: “The Non-Punishment Principle affirms that trafficked individuals should not be subjected to arrest, charges, detention, prosecution, or penalties for any illegal conduct directly resulting from their trafficking experience”).</td>
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<td>Exposition to prosecution upon returning to their country of origin for victims identified as accomplice to cybercrime, which contravenes the principle of non-punishment.</td>
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* National Referral Mechanism
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<td><strong>Protection Gaps</strong></td>
<td><strong>For Law Enforcement and Consular Authorities:</strong> Increased cross-border cooperation, establishing clear lines of communication, investigations and rescue operations which prioritize victim's safety and dignity.</td>
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<td><strong>Increasingly severe violations of dignity and physical integrity</strong> in online scamming centres, including physical punishments, psychological coercive practices and gender-based violence.</td>
<td><strong>For Law Enforcement and CSOs:</strong> Training initiatives on gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches for frontline officers and social workers.</td>
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<td><strong>Processing</strong> of cases while individuals are in the compounds or in immigration detention centres, due to insufficient government facilities.</td>
<td><strong>How can IOM support?</strong> Training on gender-sensitive and trauma-informed care, in collaboration with governments and local actors.</td>
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</table>
| **Lengthy process** and **poor treatment** for victims from nationalities with limited diplomatic representation in destination countries. | **For Governments:**  
  - Provision of appropriate shelters, in line with VOT's protection needs.  
  - Partnership with NGOs and private accommodation to increase capacity.  
  **How can IOM support?** Technical guidance regarding shelter guidelines, as per the *IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking*. |
|                                                                          | **For Governments:** Rights-based and victim-centred approach adoption for the respect of human rights and equal treatment regardless of nationality.  
  **For CSOs:** Engage in protection and advocacy activities, especially for underrepresented individuals.  
  **How can IOM support?**  
  - Technical guidance on rights-based approach and victim-centred approach.  
  - Joint advocacy. |