

INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE MISSION

FORCED LABOR IN ONLINE SCAMMING - ASIA PACIFIC

OVERVIEW

Since late 2020, IJM has discovered a rapid increase in victims of human trafficking being forced to work for criminal scam operations. Over the past 2+ years, IJM has been tracking media reports and independent witness testimonies about workers from other countries who had found themselves trapped in large, heavily guarded compounds and forced to conduct various scams after being sold, trafficked, or tricked into accepting jobs under false pretenses.

People have been trafficked from Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Turkey, Bangladesh, China and over 25 other countries as far as Eritrea, the UK and Brazil. According to witnesses and media reports, criminal groups maximize social media outlets to advertise lucrative jobs with good salaries and ideal working conditions.

Frequently, recruiters arrange transport either by a combination of flight or land travel. Once at the facility, the organized crime syndicate takes the workers' passports/I.D.s and cell phones to cut off communication and the ability to travel. Recruited workers are locked inside heavily guarded compounds and not allowed to leave. All victims IJM helped remove report being directly physically abused or having observed others being abused.

These individuals are forced to work on scamming for between 12-20 hours a day, six days a week, often with as little as 4 hours of sleep. Reports consistently indicate that they receive no medical attention and little food.

There is also a steady stream of reported suicides and other mysterious deaths in the vicinity of these compounds.

Last year, The Cambodian government launched a crackdown effort that removed at least 2,000 laborers. However, it appears that the industry continues to thrive with official estimates reaching 100,000 laborers in the broader industry. IJM estimates the industry generates at least US\$12B per year in Cambodia alone.

While Cambodia has initially emerged as a primary hotspot, exploitation is also reported in Laos, Myanmar, Philippines. Some experts suggest that the industry may be twice as large in Myanmar as in Cambodia with criminal groups finding cover behind the country's profound political and economic instability.



Satellite image of call center compounds in Myanmar
Source: Maxar

IJM's RESPONSE

To date, IJM has had the honor to help remove and care for over a hundred individuals who we determined to be victims of forced labor within Southeast Asia's scam compounds. IJM offices in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, Indonesia (through partners) and Malaysia proactively coordinate with their government agencies and foreign embassies to help facilitate rescues and repatriation of the victims and connect with partners to provide legal and psychosocial support.

Our team is engaging with governments from APAC and around the world, UN Agencies, research agencies, and civil society to share learning and find ways to work more effectively, coordinate, and respond to this issue.

IJM works with governments and local partners to strengthen protection for vulnerable workers in the Asia Pacific region. We support the efforts of our government partners to rescue and restore survivors, prosecute offenders, and strengthen the justice and social service systems, ensuring that justice and aftercare support is accessible to all victims of labor trafficking.



IJM and a local partner staff conduct debriefing with survivors from Indonesia

IJM's Recommendation

Given the complexity and severity of online scams operating out of Southeast Asia, countries need to work together to develop and carry out both short and long-term approaches to combat and prevent the spread of cyberscam slavery.

- Criminal accountability is essential to eradicate this form of violent crime. Otherwise, one compound may close down, but another will rise in its place.
- Proper victim identification and social service provision are vital for the removed individuals. The application of the non-punishment principle as part of a victim-centered approach is crucial in ensuring individual rights are upheld. This also encourages more disclosures that would lead to better understanding of the crime and more opportunities for intervention.
- Increased vigilance will be necessary for the governments to continue pursuing these groups as they leave the major cities and are displaced to more remote regions.
- Cross-border law enforcement collaboration is critical as criminal groups move into new territories
- Governments should conduct robust inspection regimes, revoke permits and licenses to operate of erring companies, and recommend Internet Service Providers to discontinue service for businesses involved in online scamming.
- IJM also calls for a coordinated response among the ASEAN countries and their partners, international governments, U.N. bodies, and local and international agencies to address this issue regionally.

STATISTICS



100,000+
scamming workers
estimated in
Cambodia alone



200,000+
scamming workers
estimated in
Myanmar¹



500,000+
estimated workers
regionally



35+
different nationalities
have been in
scamming compounds
regionally



100+
survivors rescued
with IJM interventions

¹ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/myanmars-criminal-zones-growing-threat-global-security>

"When I managed to leave the compound with other trafficked victims, I understood the real meaning of freedom."

-Miracle*

MIRACLE STORY

Miracle*, an Indonesian citizen, planned to find a decent job to save money for retirement. Her friend, who was then known as the agent or broker, offered her a job in Cambodia as an online marketer with a high salary. When she arrived in Cambodia, she found it wasn't a typical online marketing job. She was forced to create fake social media accounts for dating scams and other online cons.

Her role was to scour the internet for victims she could trick into investing in an online scam. Her employers withheld her passport, together with other workers, and they couldn't leave the compound. Although she could do the job, Miracle was never comfortable scamming people online. Her targets were wealthy, older people from different countries to invest in cryptocurrency. Every day, she was forced to scam three people. If she failed, she would receive physical punishment like forced push-ups. Thankfully, Miracle could find ways to contact her brother to rescue her from the compound. Her brother and his wife requested IJM for help. IJM contacted the local authorities for rescue.

The Cambodian Police quickly rescued her along with eight workers from Indonesia. Later, Miracle and other Indonesian survivors were evacuated to the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. They were finally repatriated to Indonesia via Batam at the end of June 2022. They were provided with meals, accommodation, and return flight tickets via Singapore. When Miracle and eight other trafficked workers returned to Indonesia, the trafficking case was then reported to the police by the Indonesian Embassy.

The three perpetrators were subsequently arrested and put on trial in November 2022. Along with other survivors, Miracle testified for the case against the brokers. In March 2023, the three perpetrators were convicted of human trafficking for forced labor in cyber-scramming by a District Court in Batam, Indonesia.

**A pseudonym*



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INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE MISSION'S mission is to protect people in poverty from violence by rescuing victims, bringing the criminals to justice, restoring survivors to safety and strength, and helping local law enforcement build a safe future that lasts.

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