

Exploiting Migration Channels: **Trafficking for Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia**

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Abstract:

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people have been trafficked into forced criminality within scam compounds across Southeast Asia. International NGOs have identified victims of trafficking from over 40 nationalities within these centers. Victims are lured through various forms of coercion and deception, often via fake job advertisements promising lucrative opportunities abroad. Upon arrival, traffickers confiscate passports, confine victims in heavily guarded compounds, and force them to carry out cyber-enabled crimes. Drawing on survivor narratives, this paper explores how criminal networks exploit both legal and irregular migration channels to traffic individuals into scam compounds across Southeast Asia. It also examines how institutional violence, arising from legal inconsistencies, impacts victim protection and complicates repatriation efforts.

Keywords: human trafficking; forced criminality; cyber-enabled crimes; Special Economic Zones (SEZs); scam compounds

Introduction

According to Article 3(a) of the Palermo Protocol, trafficking in persons is “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability...” (United Nations, 2000). While existing literature has primarily focused on forced labor and sexual exploitation under this definition, an increasingly prevalent yet underexplored form is trafficking for forced criminality.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines trafficking for forced criminality as “the trafficking in persons for the purpose of exploitation of victims through forcing or otherwise compelling them to commit criminal acts for economic or other gains of traffickers or exploiters” (2023, p. 1). The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue by disrupting organized crime operations and creating new vulnerabilities. With lockdowns and travel restrictions shutting down illicit industries like casinos, criminal networks repurposed

these venues into scam compounds, where trafficked individuals are forced to engage in cyber-enabled crimes (Humanity Research Consultancy [HRC], 2024). The economic downturn and rising unemployment further increased susceptibility to deceptive job offers, fueling exploitation. These compounds are often found in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), areas with limited law enforcement oversight (OHCHR, 2023, p. 10). While these operations have been identified globally, this paper will focus on Southeast Asia, particularly the SEZs of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, where the problem is most acute.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that tens of thousands of people had been trafficked for forced criminality in this region, though the actual number is likely much higher (2023, p. 1). Victims identified by International NGOs come from over 40 nationalities across Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Africa (UNODC, 2023, p. 2). The scale and reach of these criminal networks highlight how trafficking for forced criminality diverges from traditional trafficking routes, which often align with migration pathways. For example, Thailand, previously a destination country for human trafficking along conventional migration routes, is now both an origin and transit country for forced criminality (IOM, 2023, pg. 2). This shift raises the core research question: To what extent do criminal networks exploit legal and irregular migration channels to traffic individuals into scam compounds across Southeast Asia, and how does institutional violence impact victim protection and complicate repatriation efforts?

Literature Review

Despite growing media coverage of human trafficking into scam centers (BBC, 2023; McCarthy, 2023; Westerman, 2023), scholarly research on the issue remains limited. Reports from NGOs and international organizations such as INTERPOL (2023), IOM (2024), and HRC (2022) offer valuable insights into trafficking channels, online scams, and emerging trends in trafficking for forced criminality. To fully understand the mechanisms enabling this form of exploitation, it is essential to examine migration and transnationalism theories that explain how individuals become vulnerable to deceptive recruitment.

Lee's (1966) push and pull factor model provides a framework for understanding the forces that drive migration. These dynamics are particularly relevant to trafficking for forced criminality, where traffickers exploit economic hardship and the lure of employment

opportunities, deceiving individuals with false promises of high-paying jobs. However, Castles (2010) argues that economic factors cannot fully explain the complexities of migration, emphasizing the role of structural forces in shaping migration flows. Traffickers capitalize on these broader structural conditions, which are identified in various works as global economic inequalities, restrictive immigration policies, and weak cross-border law enforcement, in order to create systemic vulnerabilities that facilitate exploitation (de Haas, 2010; George, Tsouros, & McNaughton, 2018; Shelley, 2012).

While these migration theories provide a foundation for understanding vulnerability to trafficking, empirical research is needed to examine how these dynamics manifest in cases of forced criminality. In the first scholarly article on the subject, Lazarus, Chiang, and Button (2025) examine the intersection of human trafficking and cybercrime, drawing on the firsthand testimony of a trafficking survivor. Their study offers critical insight into how traffickers exploit both legal and illegal migration channels to transport victims. Key findings highlight the use of tourist visas to facilitate cross-border movement, the complicity of corrupt border officials, and the confiscation of passports as a method of control.

The transnational nature of these criminal networks, combined with the victim-offender overlap, complicates efforts to protect and repatriate victims who manage to escape the compounds. Scholars such as Jennings (2012) and Daquin & Daigle (2021) have examined the factors contributing to this identity formation, while Wang (2024) applies this framework specifically to victims of forced criminality. Wang highlights how coercion into perpetrating scams blurs the distinction between victim and criminal, generating a fear of prosecution if they attempt to escape. This fear is further reinforced by legal inconsistencies across jurisdictions. As noted by the UNODC (2023), origin and destination countries often disagree on whether individuals should be classified as trafficking victims or treated as visa overstayers and criminals. This ambiguity not only hinders victim protection efforts but also exposes survivors to prosecution, detention, and other forms of institutional violence.

Methodology

This research adopts a case study approach, drawing on the firsthand accounts of three survivors of human trafficking for forced criminality—two from Bangladesh and one from Uganda.

Structured, one-hour virtual interviews were conducted, ensuring compliance with ethical

standards and informed consent procedures. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, survivor names are not disclosed. Triangulation was employed to enhance the validity of findings, combining survivor narratives with secondary data from NGO reports, government documents, and academic literature.

It is important to note that testimonial data is inherently subjective and may be influenced by trauma, memory distortion, or self-preservation. The researcher is employed by The Mekong Club and was connected to the survivors through a partner organization. Consequently, participant selection did not account for factors such as gender, age, race, or sexual orientation, limiting the integration of a fully intersectional analysis. Future research should aim to include a more diverse range of survivor narratives to address this gap. By combining survivor testimonies and secondary data, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how migration channels are exploited for human trafficking into scam compounds, while minimizing potential biases.

Exploitation of Legal Migration Channels

Contrary to popular belief, criminal networks are not confined to underground operations but frequently exploit legal migration channels to recruit and transport victims under the guise of legitimate employment opportunities. A common tactic evidenced in all three cases involves manipulating visa processes, obtaining tourist visas in lieu of proper employment permits to expedite travel and avoid scrutiny by border authorities. When one victim questioned the recruitment agency, he was reassured, “If you want to go with an employment visa, that will take a long time...They will give you a working visa with a work permit there.”

In line with the push-pull factor model (Lee, 1966), traffickers capitalize on the desperation of the victims to improve their economic circumstances. One victim explained, “For us in developing countries, if someone gets a chance to go and work outside of the country...it’s something that you cannot just skip.” Another added, “I was looking for better job opportunities where I can make some good money.” In this context, the promise of opportunity outweighed the perceived risks, positioning the tourist visa as a pragmatic compromise rather than a warning sign.

In all three cases, the victims traveled by air. As Sakdiyakorn and Vichitrananda (2010) note, such movement would be nearly impossible without the complicity of corrupt officials within border control and immigration. This claim is supported by the testimony of one victim, who was instructed to take a photograph of himself at the Ugandan airport and to maintain the same appearance throughout his journey. He shared: “When I got to the airport in Thailand, there was a police officer who had the picture of me...He took me straight through immigration, no questions asked.” This convergence of deceptive recruitment, legal migration channels, and official complicity illustrates the complexity of modern trafficking networks, which continuously evolve in response to the broader structural conditions that sustain and reinforce control over victims.

Irregular Migration Pathways

According to the UNODC (2023, p. 2), a key indicator of trafficking in persons for forced criminality during the transportation stage is when a person enters one country on a legitimate visa and is subsequently guided to cross irregularly into another. In such cases, victims may find themselves in unknown locations, unaware that they have crossed borders illegally. This is reflected in the narrative of one victim who recalled, “I realized we were not driving on the right-hand side of the road. That’s when I knew we had crossed into another country. I did not know which country we were in, I just knew we had crossed into another country.”

In two cases, victims were informed that the company was located near Bangkok, no more than an hour’s drive from the airport. However, once in the vehicles arranged by the traffickers, they were driven for between six and eight hours. Along the route, they encountered numerous checkpoints. One victim recounted, “The driver stopped and talked to the officers at the roadblocks and gave them what I could clearly see was money.” This underscores the role of corruption as a means for facilitating irregular cross-border movement.

Two of the victims were forced to cross the Moei River, the natural border between Thailand and Myanmar. One said that as he approached the riverbank, a group of ten to twelve people emerged from the nearby forest. “They touched my hand and said, ‘follow me.’ Everyone had a gun.” The visible presence of firearms, and the accompanying threat of violence, is another tactic used by traffickers to assert control. Until that point, the victims were relatively easy to transport, as they had been deceived by false promises and agreed to travel willingly.

The conditions in and around SEZs create environments conducive to this type of crime. Felson (2006) describes such areas as “offender convergence settings” (p. 99) where facilitators, enforcers, and victims are brought together, setting the stage for criminal activity. In the context of trafficking for forced criminality, SEZs and border regions act as hubs where accomplices can coordinate, corruption can be leveraged, and illicit processes can begin with relative ease and low risk.

Migration Challenges in Returning Home

Even when victims manage to escape the scam compounds, they face significant challenges during repatriation, primarily due to the lack of identification documents and expired visas, which leave them vulnerable to arrest and detention.

In one case, a victim reached out to the IOM for assistance. He was informed of the risks of being detained by police and offered support through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which is intended to formally identify trafficking victims (IOM, 2019). However, he was told that the process is lengthy and has only a 3% success rate. With no alternative, he reported to the immigration authorities. When he did, he was ordered to pay an overstay fine and detained, eventually being transferred to an immigration detention center in Bangkok. He remained there for three weeks without any outside communication. This is in direct violation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), which guarantees that trafficking victims should not be unjustly detained (ASEAN, 2015, Art. 14, para. 8).

Another victim, whose visa had expired for over 100 days, faced similar treatment. “I went to the Cambodian immigration office and asked how I could get back home. They said I had to extend my visa, but refused to waive the overstay fine of 10 US dollars for every day...They didn't recognize me as a trafficking victim even though I told them I was detained in a scamming compound.” Despite Cambodia's obligations under the non-punishment principle of ACTIP, which holds that victims should not be penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct consequence of their trafficking, he was treated as an immigration offender rather than as a victim in need of protection (ASEAN, 2015, Art. 14, para. 7). This exemplifies the victim- offender overlap discussed by Wang (2024) in cases of forced criminality.



Conclusion

This study challenges prevailing assumptions about migration systems and cross-border trafficking, offering a more nuanced understanding of human trafficking for forced criminality.

Survivor testimonies reveal the sophisticated methods of recruitment, transport, and control employed by criminal networks. Policymakers must prioritize stronger regulatory frameworks, greater cross border cooperation, and enhanced victim support systems to mitigate the risks of trafficking through both legal and irregular migration channels. Addressing the gaps in victim protection and repatriation, particularly those stemming from legal inconsistencies around the victim-offender overlap, is critical for more effective policy responses. Future research should broaden the scope of survivor narratives to better capture gendered experiences and deepen understanding of this rapidly evolving form of exploitation.


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