

UN says hundreds of thousands trafficked into SE Asia online scam centers

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United Nations, August 29 (RHC)-- Hundreds of thousands of people are being trafficked by criminal gangs and forced to work in scam centers and other illegal online operations that have sprung up across Southeast Asia in recent years, the United Nations said in a report issued in New York.

The report cited “credible sources” estimating that at least 120,000 people across Myanmar and approximately 100,000 in Cambodia may be trapped in scam operations, with other criminal-owned enterprises in Laos, the Philippines and Thailand ranging from crypto-fraud to online gambling.

“People who are coerced into working in these scamming operations endure inhumane treatment while being forced to carry out crimes. They are victims. They are not criminals,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk.

The UN Human Rights Office report was one of the most detailed of the phenomenon that has intensified since the COVID pandemic, fuelled by the closure of casinos that prompted moves into less regulated areas in Southeast Asia.

The fast-growing scam centers are generating billions of U.S. dollars in revenue each year, the report said. “Faced with new operational realities, criminal actors increasingly targeted migrants in vulnerable situations ... for recruitment into criminal operations, under the pretence of offering them real jobs,” the report said.

It said most of the trafficking victims were from other Southeast Asian countries as well as China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, but some were recruited from as far away as Africa and Latin America. The UN rights office called on regional governments to strengthen rule of law and tackle corruption to “break the cycle of impunity” that allows criminal enterprises to thrive.

The governments of Myanmar and Cambodia did not immediately respond to the Reuters news agency’s requests for comment on the UN report. The scale of the scourge in Southeast Asia is difficult to gauge because of the practice’s clandestine nature and gaps in the response by authorities, the report noted.

However, it said that credible sources indicated that at least 120,000 people across Myanmar may be held in situations where they are forced to carry out online scams. Estimates in Cambodia are at about 100,000, it added.

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