

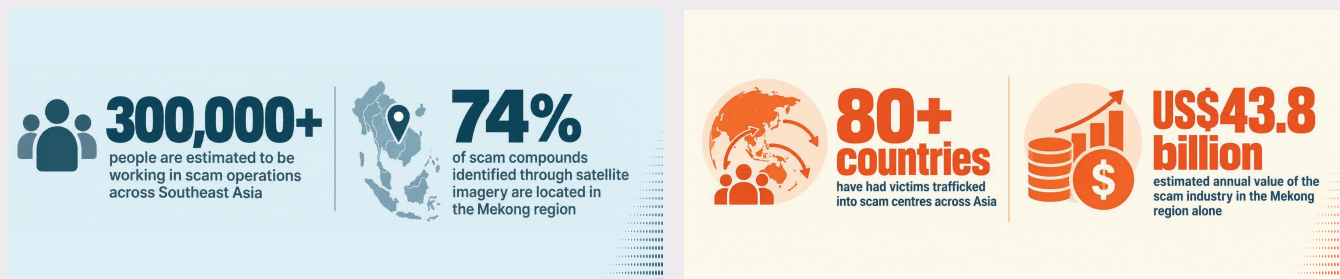


HUMAN TRAFFICKING, SCAM CENTRES AND THE PROTECTION OF SURVIVORS IN THAILAND

Brief Assessment of the Implementation of the 3rd Cycle UPR Recommendations

Trafficking for forced criminality in online scam centres has emerged as a major human trafficking challenge for Thailand, driven by cross-border scam operations in neighbouring countries and the movement of people who may themselves have been compelled to commit offences. The crisis is evolving faster than the response, exposing gaps across the full protection chain: disrupting trafficking networks, identifying victims before they are penalised, and ensuring effective protection, remedy, and sustainable reintegration after rescue.

During its 3rd UPR cycle, Thailand received 10 recommendations concerning human trafficking and supported all of them, including one calling for a victim-centred National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and consistent victim-identification and screening procedures. The recommendations also addressed prevention, protection, and assistance for victims, forced labour, effective investigation and prosecution, and international cooperation. Thailand has since strengthened its anti-trafficking response, but implementation remains partial, particularly in addressing trafficking for forced criminality, consistently applying the non-punishment principle, and ensuring effective protection and remedy after rescue.



REALITIES ON THE GROUND

Challenges

Case, Facts, and Comments



Challenge 1: Scam-centre trafficking exploits Thailand's borders and adapts to intensified enforcement

Trafficking for forced criminality has become a major human trafficking challenge in Southeast Asia. Victims are commonly recruited through fraudulent or misleading job offers, moved across borders, and subjected to confinement, violence, threats, debt bondage, document confiscation, and restrictions on movement while being compelled to carry out cyber-enabled fraud. Thailand is significantly affected as both a transit and origin country, while the scale and speed of this form of trafficking continue to strain national systems for victim identification, shelter capacity, and service provision.

The scam industry has reached an enormous scale across Southeast Asia. Credible estimates indicate that at least 300,000 people are working in scam operations across the region, with satellite imagery showing that 74% of scam compounds are located in the Mekong region. IOM has reported that victims from more than 80 countries have been trafficked into scam centres across Asia. The industry is also highly lucrative, with global annual revenues estimated at around US\$64 billion, while the industry in the Mekong region alone may be worth more than US\$43.8 billion a year.



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Thailand has intensified efforts to disrupt scam networks, including strengthened border controls, cuts to electricity, internet, and fuel supplies to areas linked to scam compounds in Myanmar, and expanded cross-border law-enforcement and intelligence-sharing. However, scam networks continue to relocate, reconnect, and rebuild across borders after enforcement action, showing that disruption of individual compounds and operations has not dismantled the wider trafficking infrastructure. Corruption and official complicity, including among immigration and local law-enforcement officials, further facilitate trafficking routes and undermine anti-trafficking efforts.



Trafficking victims cross the Moei River from Myanmar into Thailand after being released from a scam centre in Kyauk Khet, Myawaddy Township.

More than 250 people of multiple nationalities were freed on 12 February 2025 in the operation and transferred across the border for screening and repatriation.

SOURCE: AFP (12 February 2025)

"We're seeing victims from over 80 different countries being trafficked into the scam centres, which are specifically playing out across Asia," Amy Pope, IOM Director General, briefing journalists in Geneva in July 2026.

In 2025, more than 17,000 presumed victims of trafficking from over 42 countries fled scam centres in Myanmar. IOM reported that those entering Thailand from affected border areas were screened under the NRM and, where identified as trafficking victims, provided protection and assistance, including support for safe return. The scale of these movements places sustained pressure on Thailand's capacity to identify victims promptly and provide effective protection.

In one 2026 case, nine victims recruited through fraudulent Facebook job advertisements were taken via Sa Kaeo Province and smuggled into Poipet, Cambodia, where their identity documents, phones, and banking passcodes were confiscated, and they were forced to operate mule accounts and provide facial scans to authorise financial transactions.

Thailand has expanded disruption efforts. A March 2026 international operation resulted in the suspension of over 150,000 social-media accounts and the arrest of 21 suspects, alongside the introduction of the Scam and Human Trafficking Information Exchange and Linked Database (SHIELD) to strengthen cross-border information-sharing on trafficking and cyber scams. **Yet in June 2026, the Civil Society Network for Human Trafficking Victim Assistance (CSNHTV) estimated that more than 5,300 people remained trapped in scam centres near the Thai-Myanmar border.**

The O'Smach complex near the Chong Chom crossing in the Thailand-Cambodia border area illustrates the scale and coercive infrastructure of scam operations. The approximately 80-hectare site comprised 157 buildings, including 29 used for scam operations, and was estimated to have housed at least 10,000 people. It was surrounded by a three-metre wall topped with barbed wire and inward-facing surveillance cameras, and contained 10 solitary-confinement cells, handcuffs, and restraint equipment. Workers who disobeyed were reportedly subjected to torture.

The site also raised concerns about possible organ removal. UNODC has documented threats of organ removal against scam-centre victims for failing to meet quotas or as a means of control. The presence of an operating room inside the compound's hospital further heightened suspicions of possible organ harvesting.

In September 2026, Thai authorities arrested 12 South Korean nationals and one Chinese national accused of operating a scam call centre from a rented house in Samut Prakan after entering Thailand from a neighbouring country. The case adds a new dimension to Thailand's exposure: scam networks displaced by regional crackdowns may not merely use Thailand as a transit route, but re-establish operations inside the country.



Challenge 2: Victims trafficked for forced criminality remain at risk of misidentification, detention, and prosecution

Trafficking for forced criminality creates a particular victim-identification problem because trafficked persons may themselves be found carrying out fraud, money laundering, mule-account activities, or other offences under coercion, and may consequently be treated as offenders rather than trafficking victims. Regionally, nearly 70% of released survivors interviewed faced penalisation instead of protection, underscoring gaps in the application of the non-punishment principle.

In February 2025, approximately 7,000 people were released from scam compounds in Myanmar, including victims of forced criminality. Approximately 6,258 foreign nationals subsequently entered Thailand for repatriation or processing under the NRM. The scale of arrivals and resulting resource pressures led to expedited screening procedures, including assessments conducted by nationality rather than on an individual basis.



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Thailand's legal safeguards remain incomplete. Section 41 of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act restricts prosecution of trafficking victims for a limited range of immigration, document-related, prostitution-related, and unauthorised-work offences, but does not extend to fraud, money laundering, or other scam-related offences commonly associated with forced criminality.

Although Thailand's NRM provides a framework for screening and victim identification, large-scale arrivals from neighbouring scam compounds have exposed inconsistent implementation, resource constraints, and gaps in specialised expertise, particularly in border areas.

This undermined effective victim identification and created a risk that potential trafficking victims would be misclassified and denied referral to protection services.

In March 2025, Thailand facilitated the return of 119 Thai nationals from scam operations in Cambodia and charged 100 with fraud or similar offences. Although authorities committed to identifying and protecting trafficking victims within the group, unclear and inconsistent victim-identification standards created a risk that potential victims would be penalised for unlawful conduct resulting directly from their trafficking.

Thailand has taken steps to strengthen victim identification for forced criminality and, in September 2026, led a Human Rights Council joint statement affirming a victim-centred approach and the non-punishment principle. **These commitments now need to be translated into consistent practice so that potential victims are identified and protected before detention or prosecution.**



Challenge 3: Rescue and repatriation do not guarantee survivor-centred protection, effective remedy, and sustainable reintegration

Rescue and repatriation are not, by themselves, sufficient to ensure survivor-centred protection. Survivors may require legal status, safe accommodation, interpretation, medical and trauma-informed care, financial assistance, safe return, reintegration support, and protection from retaliation or re-trafficking.

In Thailand, survivor protection remains uneven, particularly for foreign victims, with documented restrictions on movement and communication in shelters, shortages of trauma-informed personnel and interpreters, and barriers to independent living and financial support.



Survivors wait in Thailand for repatriation after being removed from scam centres in Myanmar. Multinational trafficking survivors wait at a shelter inside Fort Wachiraprakan in Tak province for their embassies to arrange their return home, highlighting the uncertainty that can follow rescue and transfer across the border.

In 2025, the CEDAW Committee found that the NRM was insufficiently funded and inconsistently implemented, particularly in provincial areas, and raised concerns that non-Thai women victims of trafficking were not allowed to leave shelters or communicate with their families while awaiting perpetrators' trials.

Foreign survivors also face barriers to autonomy, legal status, and financial support. During legal proceedings, access to alternatives to government shelters remained limited, as independent living was generally available only to those who already held a valid visa or work permit. Although Thai law allows foreign trafficking victims and witnesses to remain and work in Thailand for up to two years after legal proceedings conclude, no cases were reported in which victims had actually benefited from this provision. Access to financial assistance was constrained by administrative barriers, with the complexity of obtaining support from the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Fund preventing some victims from receiving necessary financial assistance.

Effective remedy is difficult to secure in practice. Although Thai courts may award compensation to trafficking victims, enforcement remains weak, leaving some survivors to pursue compensation directly from perpetrators who frequently evade payment, thereby shifting the burden of obtaining redress back onto survivors.

Thailand introduced revised survivor-protection and repatriation procedures in 2026, including stronger safeguards on survivor agency, informed consent, re-trafficking risks, and post-reintegration follow-up. **The key remaining challenge is whether these strengthened standards are applied consistently in practice so that survivors can exercise genuine autonomy, access effective support and remedy, and avoid renewed exploitation.**

SOURCE: Chalinee Thirasupa / Reuters (19 February 2025)



RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Challenge 1: Scam-centre trafficking exploits Thailand's borders and adapts to intensified enforcement

1.1

In line with the CERD Concluding Observations (2022) and the 3rd cycle UPR recommendation made by Cambodia (2021), strengthen bilateral, regional, and inter-agency cooperation to prevent and disrupt cross-border trafficking linked to scam centres, including networks that relocate following enforcement action.

1.2

In line with the CERD Concluding Observations (2022), the 3rd cycle UPR recommendation made by the Russian Federation (2021), and the Human Rights Committee Concluding Observations (2017), effectively investigate all allegations of trafficking and official complicity, prosecute traffickers, accomplices, and public officials who facilitate trafficking, and ensure that those found responsible receive appropriate penalties.



2. Challenge 2: Victims trafficked for forced criminality remain at risk of misidentification, detention, and prosecution

2.1

In line with the CEDAW Concluding Observations (2025), the CERD Concluding Observations (2022), the 3rd cycle UPR recommendation made by the United Kingdom (2021), and the Human Rights Committee Concluding Observations (2017), ensure consistent, individualised victim screening for forced criminality before detention, prosecution, or repatriation.

2.2

Amend section 41 of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551 and related procedures to fully implement the non-punishment principle and ensure that trafficking victims are not detained, prosecuted, or otherwise penalised for unlawful acts they were compelled to commit as a direct consequence of their trafficking.



3. Challenge 3: Rescue and repatriation do not guarantee survivor-centred protection, effective remedy, and sustainable reintegration

3.1

In line with the CEDAW Concluding Observations (2025), the CERD Concluding Observations (2022), the 3rd cycle UPR recommendation made by the Syrian Arab Republic (2021), and the Human Rights Committee Concluding Observations (2017), allocate sufficient human, technical, and financial resources for survivor protection nationwide and ensure access to qualified interpretation and trauma-informed medical, psychosocial, legal, and social support.

3.2

In line with the CEDAW Concluding Observations (2025), remove unnecessary restrictions on non-Thai trafficking victims' movement and communication and ensure that shelter and protection arrangements respect survivors' autonomy and individual circumstances.

3.3

Ensure that foreign trafficking survivors have practical access to alternatives to institutional shelters and to temporary residence and work arrangements during recovery and legal proceedings, as well as effective access to the existing two-year stay-and-work provision after legal proceedings.

3.4

In line with the CAT Concluding Observations (2024), ensure that any return or repatriation of trafficking survivors is subject to individualised risk assessment and effective safeguards against refoulement, and that any repatriation is voluntary, informed, and safe.

3.5

In line with the CERD Concluding Observations (2022) and the Human Rights Committee Concluding Observations (2017), ensure trafficking survivors' effective access to financial assistance and remedies, including by removing practical and administrative barriers to the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Fund and ensuring effective enforcement of compensation awards.