



HRC BRIEFING:
**Uncovering the Spread
of Human Trafficking for
Online Fraud into Laos
and Dubai**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2023, the emergence of Laos and Dubai as focal points for illicit operations such as scamming compounds is of significant concern. Unlike Cambodia and Myanmar, where reporting and mapping of criminal activities are more extensive, Laos and Dubai have received less attention on these matters, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding the criminal activities, locations and victim profiles within their borders. However, evidence collected by Humanity Research Consultancy (HRC) indicates the prevalence of scamming compounds in these areas, highlighting the need for further investigation concentrating on criminal operations in Laos and Dubai in order to effectively address the problem.

Laos and Dubai have been chosen as the focus locations of this study given their growing prevalence as a hotspot country for human trafficking for online fraud and other illicit activities. The growing trend of human trafficking into scamming compounds is spreading rapidly, with many of the operations mirroring or overlapping one another across borders. We have chosen to discuss both Laos and Dubai together in this report as a result of the many similarities present in the illicit activities and the modus operandi of the criminals in the two locations. However, whilst there have been cases of victims being trafficked from Dubai to Laos, further investigation would be needed to verify a direct link between the two locations.

This briefing aims to address the critical need for understanding and intervention in the realms of scamming compounds, particularly within the contexts of Laos and Dubai. Specifically, it undertakes a desk-based investigation of human trafficking for online scams in these two areas, encompassing various aspects:

Compound locations and scale: Mapping out the locations and assessing the scale of scamming compounds operating in Laos and Dubai.

Victim profile: Examining the demographic characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims subjected to human trafficking for online fraud in these regions.

Type of illicit activities/fraud: Analysing the nature and scope of illicit activities perpetrated

within these compounds, including online scamming schemes and other criminal activities.

Criminal profile and modus operandi: Investigating the profiles of perpetrators involved in human trafficking and online fraud, as well as their tactics and operational methods.

Trafficking routes: Identifying the routes and methods utilised in trafficking victims through Laos and Dubai, both as final destinations and transit points.

Firstly, heightened scrutiny and enforcement measures implemented in Myanmar scamming hotspots have led to a noticeable migration of criminal activities. This shift has raised apprehension in Laos regarding the potential influx and escalation of scam operations previously displaced from Myanmar due to the Chinese crackdown (Firn and Chan, 2024). The research team also has anecdotal evidence of operations shifting from Myanmar to Dubai.

Recent findings, as will be presented throughout this briefing, demonstrate notable parallels in operational tactics in the scamming compound in Laos and Dubai with Cambodia and Myanmar. Firstly, in line with patterns observed in Cambodia and Myanmar, Chinese criminals are observed to be active in these activities, largely governing the criminal operations and compounds. Secondly, the criminal operations utilise online platforms and deceptive job advertisements as primary mechanisms for recruiting victims.

Evidence, including testimonies from survivors, shows that Dubai has become a trafficking destination and serves as a popular transit hub within the larger network of human trafficking routes. This means that victims may be trafficked into Dubai before arriving at other destinations to do scamming work, or they may be recruited for jobs abroad whilst already working legitimate jobs in Dubai. Dubai's status as a transit hub makes it a critical location within the larger framework of human trafficking networks.

Additionally, the first-hand testimonies from survivors highlight the transnational nature of criminal syndicates, exploiting individuals from diverse nationalities ranging from Asia to Africa and Europe. The survivors emphasised the critical need for enhanced awareness and understanding of exploitation dynamics not only in well-documented regions but also in less-publicised territories like Laos and Dubai.

2. TRAFFICKING ROUTES AND TACTICS INTO DUBAI AND LAOS

Trafficking Routes

With the rapid spread of the emerging trend of human trafficking for forced online fraud, the practice of buying and selling victims has become institutionalised, victims of human trafficking are traded between different transnational crime groups that operate numerous scam centres. Traffickers utilise different communication applications, such as WeChat and Telegram, to establish markets where victim profiles and prices are posted, or reach out directly to potential victims. The trafficking can occur within the same city, across different regions, or across borders (Winch et al., 2023). This investigation reveals that both Laos and Dubai function as dual hubs for human trafficking, serving as both destinations for exploitation and transit points within the global trafficking network.

Laos has emerged as a notable trafficking hotspot, particularly in connection with movements through Thailand. Notably, Thailand remains a significant transit country for victims trafficked into compounds within Laos, as evidenced by the trafficking routes outlined in the International Organization for Migration’s situational analysis as seen in figure 1 (IOM, 2024). A rising concern also centres around the increasing instances of human trafficking from Vietnam into Laos’ Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) (“More actions needed”, 2023).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was also highlighted as a host nation of scamming compounds in a policy brief published by the Bali Process, an international counter human trafficking forum, in April 2023 (Winch et al. 2023). More specifically, according to news

reports and anecdotal evidence reviewed by the team, Dubai has emerged as a significant trafficking hotspot within the UAE (Hsieh, 2023; “There is gold everywhere”, 2024).

In Dubai, recruitment agencies play a crucial role in the recruitment of trafficking victims. In some cases, individuals who have previously interacted with these agencies for lawful employment have later been duped into accepting job offers in countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, or elsewhere. Notably, agencies situated in Dubai have been implicated in this scheme. Some agencies allegedly receive payments from organised crime groups to recruit individuals for trafficking purposes, often for forced criminal activities within scam compounds located in Southeast Asia (UNODC, 2023). In May 2023, Jason Tower, the Myanmar country director for the United States Institute of Peace and a leading researcher on Southeast Asia’s scam industry, noted that there was substantial evidence indicating that the city was being utilised by scam syndicates as a transit hub for trafficked labour (Haffner and Yan, 2023).

Trafficking Tactics

Trafficking tactics in Laos and Dubai rely on various platforms and methods to recruit victims into scamming compounds. These methods include:

Recruitment through acquaintances: Victims are often recruited by individuals they know, including close friends and relatives. This aligns with recruitment trends observed in neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Cambodia. Additionally, victims within the compounds may themselves become recruiters, further perpetuating the cycle of exploitation (“Laos, a centre for scam networks”, 2023).

Collaboration with local trafficking groups: Traffickers often collaborate with local trafficking

FIGURE 1. TRAFFICKING ROUTES INTO LAOS AS IDENTIFIED BY IOM IN 2024 (IOM, 2024).



groups or brokers from the victims' source countries. These groups are responsible for enticing locals and facilitating their journey to the destination country, employing similar tactics as seen in Myanmar and Cambodia ("Laos, a centre for scam networks", 2023).

Utilisation of social media: Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Telegram, WeChat, and WhatsApp are utilised to advertise fake job opportunities with enticing promises of high salaries and employee benefits.

Job postings on platforms like Telegram offer a significant indication as to the type of jobs and salaries advertised to lure people into being trafficked. These advertisements often promise lucrative salaries and attractive benefits, with salaries as high as US\$15,000 as can be seen in figure 2 (below). These postings often advertise seemingly legitimate job opportunities, examples include Indonesian-speaking salespersons, models, and Japanese-Chinese or English-Chinese translators in both Laos and Dubai.



FIGURE 2. A JOB LISTING RECRUITING MODELS, PROCURERS, ASSISTANTS, AND TRANSLATORS IN DUBAI, LAOS, MYANMAR, AND CAMBODIA. SOURCE: TELEGRAM

Many victims are also recruited in person through local trafficking groups or agents. One victim from Sri Lanka reported the presence of a Sri Lankan trafficking group operating both in Laos and Sri Lanka, recruiting people for fake jobs that would ultimately result in them being trafficked into the GTSEZ (Visapra, 2023). In another instance, a Ugandan survivor's testimony shared with HRC, reveals how he was working in Dubai when he came across a high-paying job in data management in Laos. He went through a two-stage in-person interview process in Dubai, before being trafficked to a compound in Laos, then to Myanmar where he was sold a further three times to different compounds (Kamugisha, 2023).

3. LAOS - A TRAFFICKING DESTINATION

Human trafficking into scamming compounds in Laos in many ways mirrors the situation in Myanmar and Cambodia. As previously explored, the criminal operations and compounds are mainly governed by Chinese criminals. Moreover, the tactics used for both the recruitment of trafficking victims and scamming are largely carried out online.

With the ongoing crackdowns and raids in scam compound hotspots across Myanmar, both anecdotal evidence and media reports suggest operations are shifting to Laos. Figure 3 demonstrates the location of the currently known compounds, marked with red pins. Three of the compounds as pinpointed in the figure, reported by HRCs network of informants, were relocated to Laos amidst the crackdowns in Myanmar. According to the informants, the operators of these three compounds were previously operating in Myanmar and have moved the entire operations to Laos. There are additional cases indicating that some compounds in Myanmar are moving to Laos. For example, a scam compound in Shwe Kokko, located in Karen State in Myawaddy, has begun relocating to Laos following a warning from the Border Guard Force (BGF) of Myanmar in late 2023 (English Editor, 2024).

Currently, much of the available information regarding the presence of scamming compounds in Laos focuses on the GTSEZ, which will be explored in more detail in the following section.

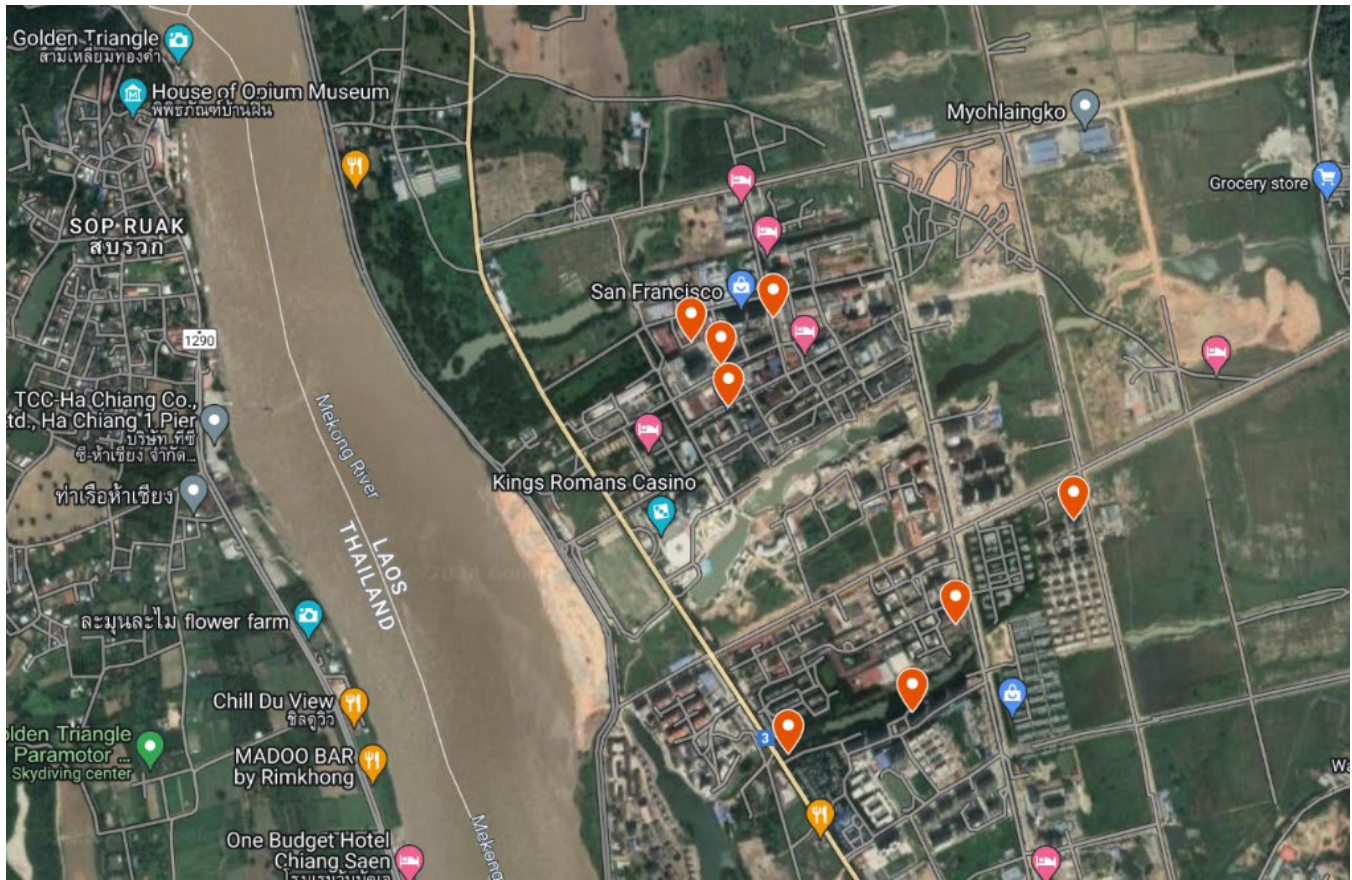


FIGURE 3. KNOWN COMPOUND LOCATIONS IN LAOS, MARKED WITH RED PINS. THREE OF THE MARKED COMPOUNDS ALLEGEDLY RELOCATED FROM MYANMAR TO LAOS. SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL ANTI-SCAM & TRAFFICKING ALLIANCE

4. THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE IN BOKEO PROVINCE

The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) is located in Bokeo province, Laos, along the Mekong River on the border with Myanmar and Thailand. The GTSEZ has long been a hub of criminal activity, including human trafficking, wildlife trafficking, forced prostitution, and drug trafficking (Serlet, 2022; Doyle, 2023). The area is governed by a private police force, and the Lao national police and other authorities often need permission to enter, having little to no jurisdiction (Malaney et al., 2024).

In 2007, the Lao government granted Chinese-born tycoon Zhao Wei a 99-year lease over the SEZ, providing him, and his company Kings Romans Group, with complete sovereignty over the area. Under the Kings Romans Group, the GTSEZ is home to the notorious Kings Romans Casino (KRC). The KRC is a major hub for drug trafficking and money laundering in connection with the wider criminal network of implicated casinos and junkets across the Asia region (UNODC, 2023).



The Economist

FIGURE 4. A MAP SHOWING LAOS, MYANMAR, THAILAND, CAMBODIA, AND CHINA, PINPOINTING THE LOCATION OF THE GTSEZ ("SOUTH-EAST ASIA", 2020).

The US Department of the Treasury sanctioned Zhao Wei and his criminal organisation in 2018, for various illicit activities including child prostitution, drug trafficking, and human trafficking, many of which were facilitated through the KRC (US Department of the Treasury, 2018). Zhao Wei's criminal network, and its associated actors, were also sanctioned by the UK government in 2023, for their involvement in human trafficking into the GTSEZ for forced online scamming (Office of Financial Sanctions, 2023). Aside from **Zhao Wei** himself, the sanctions name three other key actors: **Su Guiqin**, Chinese national, wife of Zhao Wei, and Director of Kings Romans International (HK) Co., Limited; **Nat Rungtawankhiri**, Thai national, and Director of Kings Romans International (HK) Co., Limited; **Abbas Eberahim**, Australian national, and Director General at Kings Romans Casino.

Despite sanctions against the SEZs key actors, and ample evidence of illicit activities happening within the zone, its expansion continues. For example, an

international terminal is currently under construction in the airport serving the GTSEZ. Once complete, the terminal will allow for direct flights from China, without the need to transit through Thailand (Malaney et al., 2024). This may facilitate the trafficking of victims into the zone, without the ability to bypass Thailand as a transit country.

A [video](#) shared online in February 2024, shot in the GTSEZ, shows the expansive Chinese-investment in the area, with most signage being written in Mandarin (Huaihua, 2024). The producer of the video also shared how many people around him were speaking Mandarin from China whilst also showing numerous luxury cars with number plates from China. The video also shows large groups of people from multiple countries in the areas surrounding the scamming compounds, including India and African nations (Huaihua, 2024).

5. VICTIM PROFILES AND TRAFFICKING JOURNEY

Victim Profiles

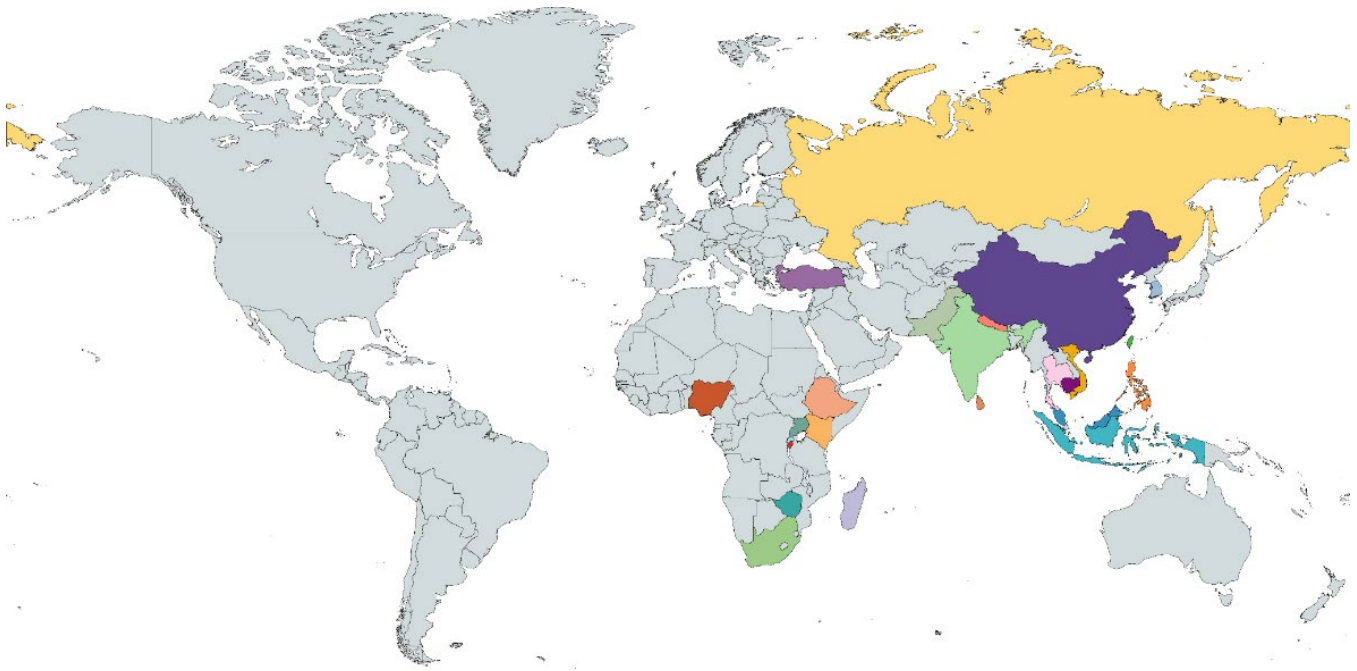


FIGURE 5. A MAP HIGHLIGHTING THE SOURCE COUNTRIES OF VICTIMS TRAFFICKED INTO SCAMMING COMPOUNDS IN LAOS AS IDENTIFIED BY HRC. SOURCE: MAPCHART.

Victim source countries of those trafficked into scamming compounds in Laos, mainly within the GTSEZ, include: **Burundi, Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Laos, Madagascar, Malaysia, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe** (see figure 5).¹ In their latest situational report on the issue, IOM (2024) stated that the majority of victims were males in their mid twenties who had completed secondary education and were proficient in English as well as their mother tongues.

Of particular significance is the number of victims from Malaysia being trafficked into Laos. In late 2022 it emerged that 700 Malaysians were trapped in compounds in Laos, the majority in the GTSEZ, with most being forced to carry out online fraud (RFA Lao, 2022). Anecdotal evidence as well as media reports also suggests Vietnam to be a growing key source country ("More actions needed", 2023).

Amongst Lao nationals, Lao youth are increasingly at risk of being trafficked into the scamming compounds, both within Laos and outside, to countries such as Myanmar (Saiya, 2024). This is likely due to the extensive use of social media and other online platforms as a means of recruitment for traffickers.

In 2022, 45 Laotians were trafficked from Laos to Kosai Casino in Myanmar, 16 of whom were aged 14-23. Once in the casino they were forced to work as scammers, facing beatings and punishments such as being forced to stand in the sun for several hours if they failed to meet their scamming targets. The group of 16 young victims were rescued in late 2023, with the remaining 16 believed to be still trapped in the compound (Souphatta, 2023).

Victims' nationalities may influence the treatment they receive whilst in the compounds, with racism and xenophobia at play. For example, survivors have shared observations of Asian victims being treated better than their African counterparts whilst in the compounds.

Trafficking Routes - Example Cases

Many foreign trafficking victims fly to Bangkok, Thailand, before being transferred by bus or domestic flight to Chiang Rai, Thailand. When they reach the airport or bus station in Chiang Rai, they are collected by a member of the organised crime group and transported near the border between Thailand and Laos. They are accommodated overnight in a guest house in the border area, and then transported, usually in a small group, to Laos by boat, then transported to a scam compound in Laos (UNODC, 2023).

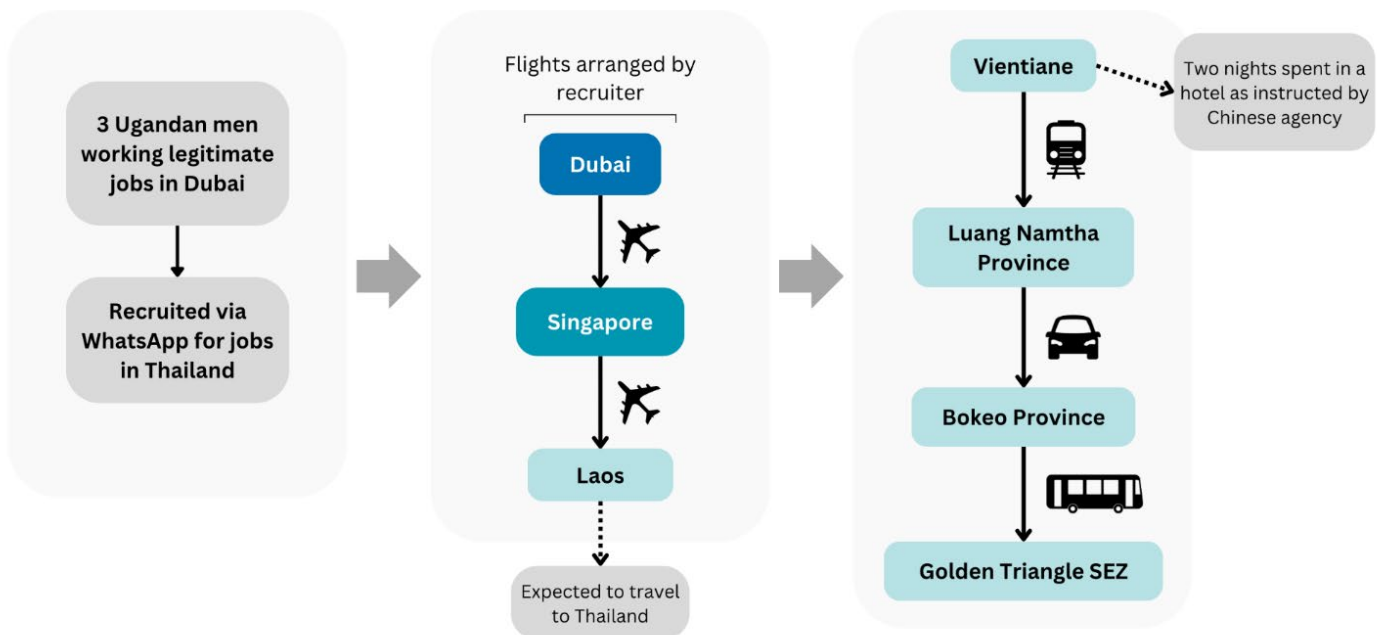


FIGURE 6. VISUALISATION OF THE JOURNEY TAKEN BY THE THREE UGANDAN MEN TRAFFICKED FROM DUBAI, THROUGH SINGAPORE, INTO LAOS.

1 This data was gathered and analysed by HRC through media mapping of related reports, further backed up by victim testimonies, collected throughout 2022-2024.

In a case that emerged on 2nd March 2023, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) reported a series of alarming complaints regarding alleged human trafficking activities in Laos (“15 complaints made”, 2023). This case involved traffickers transporting four young women and a young man, out of 15 documented cases, from Thailand to Laos, having received US\$5,000 each from a Chinese company for providing the employees.

Another recent case study shared with HRC by a local NGO details the journey of three Ugandan men who were working in Dubai before being trafficked to Laos (as visualised in figure 6). The individuals were recruited via WhatsApp for a job in Thailand. The recruiter arranged their flights from Dubai to Singapore, then to Laos. Upon their arrival in Laos, they anticipated travelling to Thailand, but were instead directed by a Chinese agency to a hotel in Vientiane, where they stayed for two days. The Chinese agency then transported them by train to Luang Namtha province, then to Bokeo province by car. Upon arrival in Bokeo, they were transported by bus to the GTSEZ. This case study also underscores the interconnectedness of human trafficking routes between Dubai and Laos. Furthermore, this case highlights the use of Dubai as a transit and source country for victims from around the world, many of whom are trafficked into Southeast Asia or other countries in the Middle East, as will be discussed in section 7.

Scale of the Issue

Providing an estimate of the number of victims currently in scamming compounds in Laos is challenging due to the current lack of data surrounding the issue. However, evidence suggests the number could be in the thousands. In 2022, Lao authorities reported the rescue of 1,255 victims from the GTSEZ, 493 of whom were women (Visapra, 2022). Meanwhile, our team’s analysis of just over 15 media reports revealed a total of over 1,100 victims. Whilst it was not possible to determine whether this accumulation of reports combined with the rescue reported by the Lao authorities involves a

duplication of victims, these numbers are regardless an indication as to the scale of the issue in Laos.

Furthermore, a survivor from a compound in Laos estimated there were 5,000 people in their compound, and 40,000 in the entire GTSEZ. We have not been able to confirm these numbers, however, figure 7 and 8 below show the satellite image and street view of the compound location, the buildings in the area are numbered to show the correlation between the satellite and street view. Building 1 is the multi-story building, with approximately 11 stories, that the victim was held in. Building 2 is a seemingly identical building, likely to be also housing scamming operations. Based on HRC’s previously acquired knowledge on the structure of compound areas, the compounds are often fenced off areas, within which there are multiple apartment style buildings complete with offices for scamming and bunk-bed dormitories for the workers (or victims). Victim testimonies shared with HRC have revealed that those in the compounds can be placed 6-30 people to a room, depending on its size.



FIGURE 7. A SATELLITE IMAGE OF A COMPOUND IN THE GTSEZ, LAOS. BUILDING 1 IS A CONFIRMED SCAMMING COMPOUND WHERE A VICTIM WAS HELD. BUILDING 2 IS A SEEMINGLY IDENTICAL BUILDING, LIKELY TO BE ALSO RUNNING FRAUD OPERATIONS. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS.



FIGURE 8. A STREET VIEW IMAGE OF THE LOCATION AS SEEN IN FIGURE 7. THE BUILDINGS ARE LABELLED TO AID UNDERSTANDING OF ORIENTATION. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS.

6. ILLICIT ACTIVITIES IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE

Forced Online Scamming

The scamming activities found in compounds in the GTSEZ mirror those found throughout the region, including romance scams and investment scams, as well as voice phishing. In November 2023, Laos authorities deported 462 Chinese nationals involved in scam call centres fuelled by victims of human trafficking in the GTSEZ (RFA Lao, 2023). A testimony provided by a Ugandan survivor to a local NGO, explained how in his compound they were forced to defraud people online for 13.5 hours a day. They were placed in office-like rooms, 40 to a room, and divided into four or five teams complete with a team leader. The criminals required each team to earn US\$200,000 per month, a collective total of US\$ 1 million, with individuals being punished if they failed to meet personal quotas of at least US\$500 per month. Punishments included salary deductions or physical punishments such as being forced to stand in the sun for prolonged peri-

ods without food or water. In terms of the scamming activities, the bosses, who were Chinese, provided a pre-prepared list of names and contact details for potential scam targets, with a particular focus on wealthy European men. Those in the compound would assume the identity of an attractive woman in order to lure the targets into the scam. Figure 9 (below) provides a visual representation of the scamming operation as presented in this testimony.

One media report reveals how remuneration from the scams varies depending on the profile of the scam victim, which may indicate the amount of money they will have to lose. For example, scams in Thai language receive a remuneration of 4,500-5,000 yuan a month (approx. 620-700 USD), whilst Chinese and English receive 8,000 yuan per month (approx. 1100 USD) (Bhumithon, 2022). One media interview with a Sri Lankan survivor who was trapped in a compound with around 100 other Sri Lankan men, explains how they were made to conduct romance scams. This involved them engaging in romantic conversations with American targets before persuading them to invest in Tether, a crypto coin. The scams were supported by translation and hacking software to allow them to easily target men over 30 on dating apps or websites (Visapra, 2022). Survivors have also reported being sold to different companies operating across the compounds, sometimes as a result of failing to meet scamming quotas.

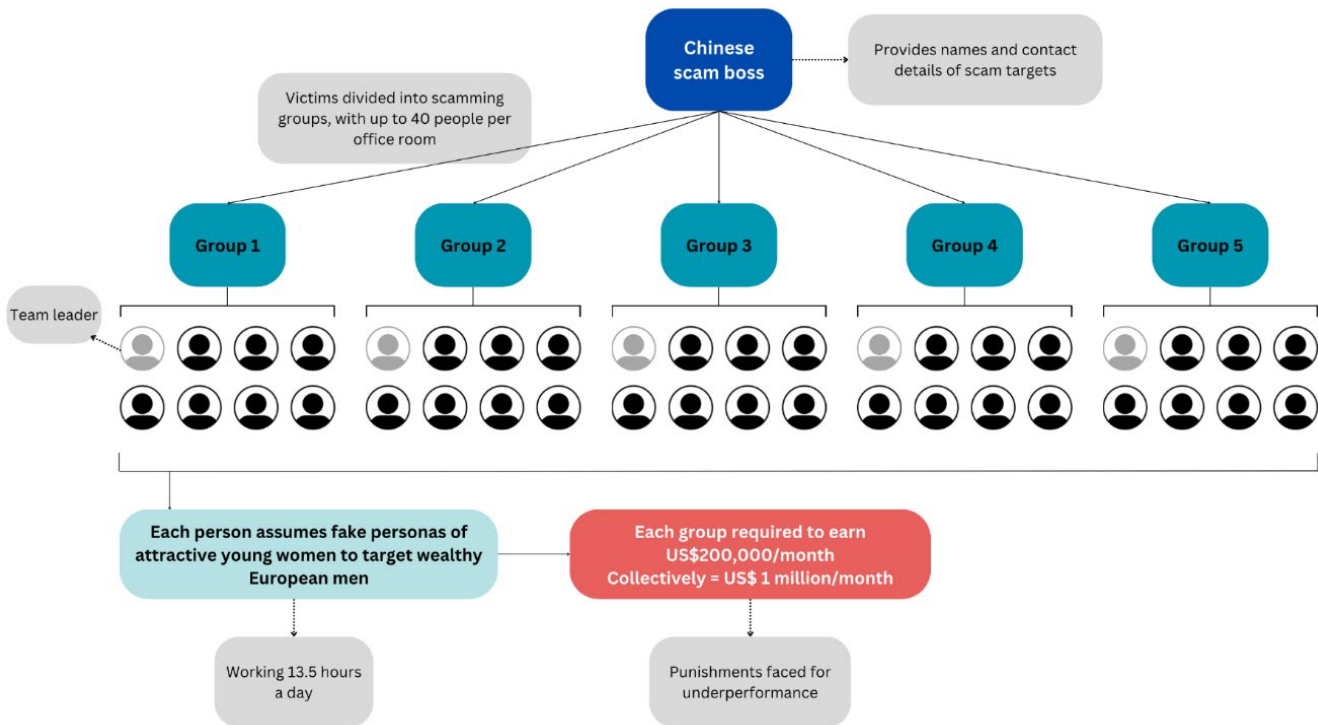


FIGURE 9. A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF A SCAM OPERATION AS SEEN IN A COMPOUND IN THE GTSEZ. THIS INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED THROUGH VICTIM TESTIMONIES AND COMPILED INTO A VISUAL FORMAT BY HRC.

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation is prevalent within scamming compounds across the region with brothels operating inside the compounds, victims being sexually abused, and victims being forced into prostitution or other forced sexual activities. Media reports reveal how women are trafficked into the GTSEZ in Laos, initially taking jobs as call girls in casinos or barmaids in karaoke bars, only to be trapped in debt bondage and forced to sell sex to repay their debts (Whong, 2021; RFA Staff, 2024). In 2021, Lao authorities rescued 40-50 women, the majority of whom were from Vientiane. Reports have also stated the trafficking of women from South Korea, lured into Laos for Korean translation jobs only to be sold into sex trafficking or online scam operations. The South Korean government has responded to this increased targeting of South Koreans by issuing a travel ban to Laos (RFA Staff, 2024).

A victim testimony given to the HRC team revealed that some African male victims in compounds in Laos, upon exiting the compounds, were then forced to engage in the creation of pornographic content with Lao women who were also forced. This crime was overseen by Chinese criminals.

Violence and Physical Punishment

Victims and survivors from compounds in Laos have reported facing beatings and torture as a punishment for low performance, such as failing to meet their scamming quotas. Media reports have also shared the use of physical punishment such as forcing victims to stand in the sun for several hours or do 100 pushups (Visapra, 2022). Moreover, some reports have stated that victims in the compounds have been shot for not obeying orders (RFA Lao, 2022). Deaths and the murder of victims in the compounds was alleged by Datuk Hishamuddin Hashim, secretary general of the Malaysia International Humanitarian Organization, in a report by Radio Free Asia Laos (RFA Lao, 2022). An investigation conducted by the International Crisis Group in 2024 also reveals the story of a man working in a scamming compound in Laos who was later found dead, with the cause of death currently unknown (Malaney et al., 2024). These reports indicate that at least one or two deaths have occurred within or in relation to the scamming compounds, however, further investigation would be needed to provide a concrete number of the total number of deaths.

7. DUBAI - A CRIME HOTSPOT AND A TRAFFICKING HUB

Overview of Dubai

Despite its location outside the widely reported Southeast Asia region, many compounds in Dubai, to the best of our knowledge, are managed by Chinese-speaking criminals, operating similarly to those in Southeast Asia. Dubai serves multiple purposes in these trafficking- and scamming-related crimes. It is a trafficking destination, a transit point, and a hotspot for scams.

Dubai has been reported as a transit point for victims trafficked to the Middle East, to areas such as Oman ("About 50 human trafficking", 2022), Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria (Kyaw, 2024). The victims are often women from Myanmar and the Philippines, trafficked into domestic servitude (CNI, 2023; MEE, 2021). For example, in late 2023, three Burmese girls were trafficked to Iraq via Dubai by a Burmese manning agency. Initially promised jobs in Dubai by their broker, they were instead trafficked to Iraq and subjected to abuse by an Iraqi manning agency. They were subsequently rescued by a collaborative effort involving the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in Cairo, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Following their rescue, they were returned to Myanmar in February 2024 ("Three workers in Dubai", 2024). During the same period of time, in August 2023, an additional six victims were sold into domestic servitude in Iraq through Dubai (Satt, 2023). In January 2024, a report revealed that the family members of the victims had lost contact with them, and one of the women is presumed dead. The report states that the women are facing sexual exploitation from individuals related to the broker and men in their places of work, receive little to no wages, and are given one meal a day. The women have been forced into domestic servitude in the house of the brokers' parents and are also made to work in adult entertainment shops (Kyaw, 2024). Earlier reports in 2021 reveal the plight of about 35 women and children, some as young as 12 years old, who had been trafficked to Syria through Dubai to work as domestic workers (MEE, 2021). Although the aforementioned cases are not necessarily linked to the trend of human trafficking for forced online fraud, they nonetheless highlight Dubai's role as a transit hub for all forms of human trafficking.

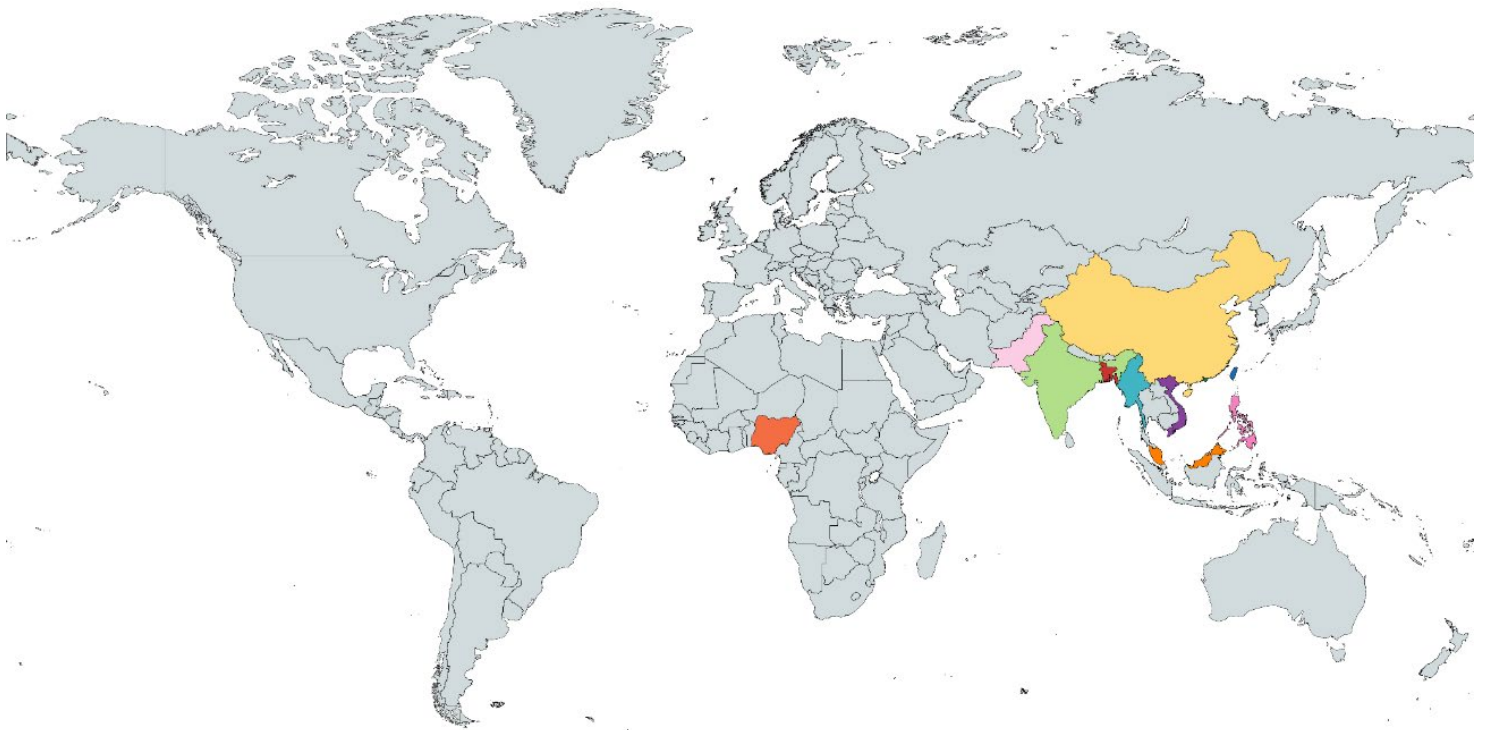


FIGURE 10. A MAP HIGHLIGHTING NATIONALITIES OF VICTIMS TRAFFICKED INTO DUBAI AS IDENTIFIED BY HRC. SOURCE: MAPCHART.

As a trafficking destination and a scam hotspot, Dubai is flooded with scammers and victims from North Africa and Southeast Asia, a lot of whom arrived in Dubai as “migrant workers” (Browning, 2024). The home countries of trafficking victims include but are not limited to **Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Hong Kong, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Nigeria** (see figure 10).

The following locations are the sites alleged to be housing scamming compounds identified by the HRC team (see figure 11). Each location pinpointed on the map in figure 11 will be individually explored, along with the so-called Prince compound whose location was unable to be found by the research team.

Scam Sites and Compounds in Dubai

Through extensive data collection, the team has identified a list of scam sites located within the greater Dubai area. In September 2023, two Chinese individuals who had been living and working in Dubai for a decade, shared with a Chinese media platform that there appears to be an increasing number of scamming compounds emerging in the city (“The telecom scam operations”, 2023). Another Chinese businessman claimed that he visited one of the compounds to put up job advertisements. Within the compound, he observed multiple office buildings, each equipped with security gates at the entrance. Only higher-level employees possessed access cards allowing unrestricted entry and exit from the buildings, while regular employees did not have such privileges (“Rumour has it”, 2023).

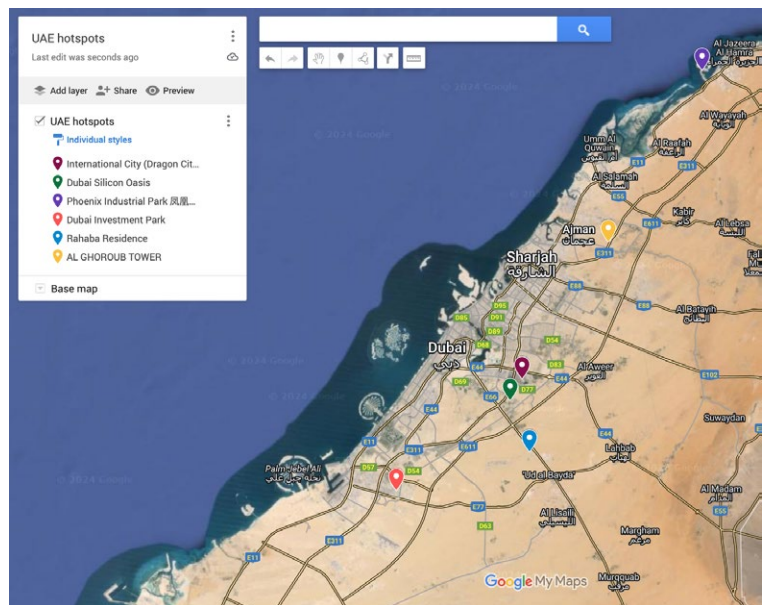


FIGURE 11. A MAP PINPOINTING THE KNOWN LOCATION OF CONFIRMED OR SUSPECTED SCAMMING HOTSPOTS ACROSS DUBAI AND AJMAN. THE MAP CAN BE VIEWED [HERE](#).

International City ("Dragon City")

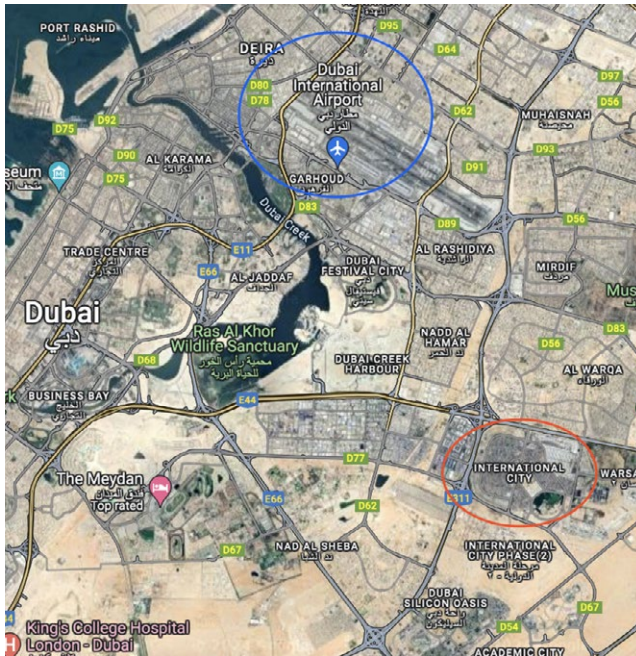


FIGURE 12. SATELLITE IMAGE OF INTERNATIONAL CITY IN DUBAI. THE BLUE CIRCLE ON THE TOP LEFT INDICATES DUBAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAP. COORDINATES: 25.164864215443504, 55.40843004769593

Figure 12. Satellite image of International City in Dubai. The blue circle on the top left indicates Dubai International Airport. Source: Google Map. Coordinates: 25.164864215443504, 55.40843004769593

Less than half an hour's drive from Dubai International Airport, International City, nicknamed Dragon City because of the continued expansion of Dragon Mart,² is an expansive shopping and dining complex consisting of several clusters. Often regarded as the Chinatown of Dubai, the area has seen a rapid rise in Chinese investment since 2004 (Diary of mutual help, 2022), and has now become the largest Chinese trading hub outside of China (Stewart, 2019). The research team was not able to find concrete evidence of scamming compounds operating in this area. However, the continued rapid expansion of Chinese investment, as was previously seen in notorious Cambodian compound hotspot Sihanoukville, raises suspicions that the area could become a hub for Chinese-speaking criminal gangs and scamming compounds.

Dubai Silicon Oasis Compound

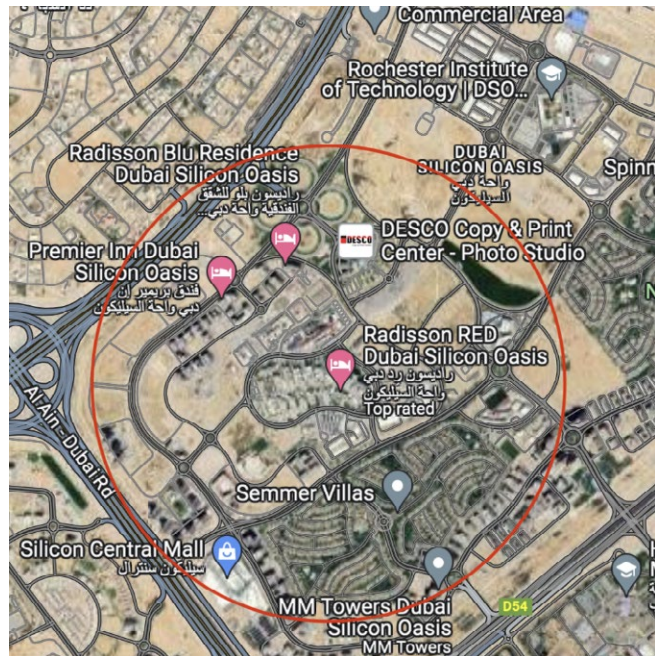


FIGURE 13. SATELLITE IMAGE OF THE DUBAI SILICON OASIS. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS. COORDINATES: 25.128701189798676, 55.38603232949323

Dubai Silicon Oasis (DSO) is a state-owned economic zone hosting a number of residential and business facilities. Based on TikTok videos and other information shared by Chinese nationals residing in Dubai, certain buildings within the zone suspected to be part of the scamming compound are enclosed by walls and tightly guarded by barbed wires (Chiang, 2023). In August 2022, an operator of a scam business confiscated mobile phones and cash from approximately ten workers, then instructed security guards to force them onto a flight bound for Myanmar ("Employees collectively running away", 2022). Although reports do not confirm this, given the trend of victims being frequently sold between compounds, the team assumes that the workers were being forced to go to Myanmar to be sold into another scamming compound.

² Dragon Mart is the name of a shopping mall located in International City

Phoenix Industrial Park



FIGURE 14. SATELLITE IMAGE OF THE PHOENIX INDUSTRIAL PARK. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS. COORDINATES: 25.68015081339708, 55.74020782883544

Several former workers at the Phoenix Industrial Park have shared on Google reviews (Khan, 2024) and Chinese online forums (Ah-Dong, 2024) that there are scamming operations taking place in this compound. An individual who used to work at Phoenix Industrial Park claimed that the company that he worked for focuses on scamming victims overseas. The compound is tightly guarded, and the employees have no means to leave the guarded areas without an access card ("Sharing my experience", 2023). Another individual claimed that the scam manager was physically violent against the workers (Haffner and Yan, 2023).

Prince Compound



FIGURE 15. SCREENSHOT FROM LEAKED CCTV FOOTAGE SHOWING THE INSIDE OF THE B4 COMPANY IN THE PRINCE COMPOUND (HO, 2023).

In late 2023, a company named B4 located in the Prince Compound fell victim to a cyberattack, resulting in the disclosure of personal information belonging to 300 Chinese scammers. The leaked information includes CCTV footage in the offices, computer surveillance records, passport copies, and photographs of the individuals involved in criminal activities (Ho, 2023). The location of this compound was unable to be found.

Dubai Investment Park (DIP)



FIGURE 16. SATELLITE IMAGE OF THE PHOENIX INDUSTRIAL PARK. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS. COORDINATES: 24.979947332440677, 55.176300896505595

A network of scam companies is operating within the Dubai Investment Park. A Chinese victim disclosed that the scam company he worked at specialised in online gambling frauds and employed approximately 200 staff, primarily Chinese. He estimated that his company alone was illicitly acquiring between USD 2.89 million and 4.3 million per month (Haffner, 2023). Another individual claimed that he worked as a manager in a scamming firm, managing over 60 employees, and was paid in cryptocurrency, Tether (USDT) before his employer escaped from the compound ("Ah-Dong", 2024).

Rahaba Residence



FIGURE 17. SATELLITE IMAGE OF RAHABA RESIDENCE. THE TWO BLUE CIRCLES INDICATE THE LOCATIONS OF DUBAI INTERNATIONAL CITY AND SILICON OASIS. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS. COORDINATES: 25.04390056122846, 55.42260254417723

Rahaba Residence, a residential building situated on the outskirts of Dubai City, is known to be a hub for various scam activities. From videos shared by an undercover worker based at this location, employees hired in this residence were instructed to carry out

romance scams (Browning, 2024). Reviews for this location on Google Maps indicate that some African workers are employed here by Chinese scammers and have subsequently been jailed (Khan, 2023). Kamugisha (2024), a human trafficking survivor who was trafficked from Dubai to Laos, then to Myanmar, also identified Rahaba Residence as the location of his job interview for the fake job that ultimately resulted in him being trafficked and sold to organised criminal groups. In his testimony Kamugisha notes that he has witnessed scamming operations taking place in Rahaba Residence, which he explains is made up of 20 eight-story apartment blocks.

Beyond Dubai - Scamming operations in Ajman



FIGURE 18. SCREENSHOT OF A TELEGRAM CHANNEL TITLED “SIGNIFICANT INCIDENTS IN CAMBODIA”. A USER DESCRIBES HIS EXPERIENCE WORKING IN A SCAMMING COMPANY IN AL GHOROUR TOWER (SIGNIFICANT INCIDENTS IN CAMBODIA, N.D.)

It is believed that scamming compounds also exist in Ajman, UAE’s second largest city after Dubai. According to conversations in a Telegram channel titled “Significant Incidents in Cambodia” as seen in figure 18 (below), scammers who were previously operating in a Dubai compound named Yong-Li compound relocated their operations to Ajman after Yong-Li compound became inactive (Significant incidents in Cambodia, n.d.). In this Telegram channel a user claims to be employed at a scamming company managed by someone from Fujian, China, operating in Ajman and based in the Al Ghoroub Tower. According to this user, the company focuses on scamming victims from overseas, and the boss has been withholding salary payments for the employees’ involvement in scamming activities (Significant incidents in Cambodia, n.d.). In another Telegram group suspected of being linked to scam activities, numerous job listings are posted, advertising positions such as models, marketing specialists, and translators in Ajman. This suggests the presence of similar illicit activities in the area given the parallels with job listings identified by HRC to be linked to human trafficking (Jobs in Dubai, 2024).

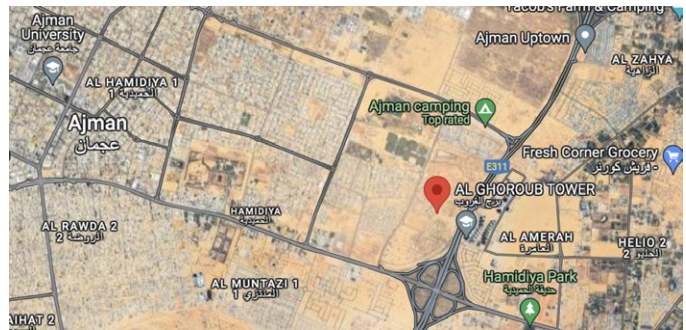


FIGURE 19. SATELLITE IMAGE OF AL GHOROUR TOWER, THE LOCATION OF THE ALLEGED SCAMMING COMPANY AS DISCLOSED IN FIGURE 18. SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS. COORDINATES: 25.39511569070121, 55.568553667967315

8. CRIMINALS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES IN THE COMPOUNDS

Similar to the scam rings in Cambodia that have expanded their operations to other countries such as Laos and Myanmar, the scam compounds in Dubai are also rife with cases of trafficking in persons, forced labour, and forced criminality.

From the various sources explored by the team, it is believed that most individuals acting as scam managers and scam business operators are Chinese. For example, the images of working contracts and videos displaying the wireless network connections in the scamming offices shared by an undercover researcher clearly show the use of simplified Chinese characters (Browning, 2024). Furthermore, information from the Prince Compound in Dubai leaked by a hacker in late 2023 showed at least 300 Chinese scammers working in the compound (Hsieh, 2023).

A recent court case in China further supports this claim. In August 2023, 21 Chinese criminals were brought to court for conducting investment scams in Dubai since 2019 (“Court hearing”, 2023). Two leaders within this criminal group purchased a number of WeChat accounts, and recruited several employees to act as “salespersons” and “lecturers.” They then instructed these individuals to utilise these WeChat accounts to interact with and scam victims through a well-structured scam tactic (“Court hearing”, 2023).

Scam tactics such as romance and investment scams have been utilised by criminals in Dubai. For instance, criminals use traditional romance scam strategies, sharing heartfelt stories of caring for loved ones or sending pictures of their day-to-day activities, to gain the trust of victims until they are lured into downloading and investing in online crypto platforms, such as YOMIGT. YOMIGT is a free Android application for crypto investment and is commonly used by scammers. These perpetrators entice victims to make investments on this platform with promising lucrative returns; however, once the funds are deposited, victims would not be able to withdraw their money.

To fuel their illicit operations, criminals have also been actively recruiting workers, both locally and internationally, for various roles in Dubai and other scamming hotspots. Some telegram groups are rife with job listings, primarily in Simplified Chinese, targeting potential workers. These listings advertise positions such as models, “madams” (female procurers), bodyguards, porn stars, secretaries, receptionists, translators, and “daily life assistants”. Responsibilities associated with these roles include taking audio or video calls with clients, customer services, sales duties, involvement in prostitution, and “building romantic relationships with clients”.

The suspicious nature of these duties and the fact that many of these positions are based in the compounds suggest their association with the illicit activities happening in Dubai. The nationalities and skill sets specified in these job listings also indicate the type of scam conducted and the scam victims targeted by these criminal groups.

The following are examples of job listings for illicit activities in Dubai:



In the listing, as shown in figure 20, the position translates literally as “conducting calculated conversations,” meaning the person is in charge of steering conversations to obtain specific information from victims to identify the best way to scam them. The criminal listed “building romantic relationships (with victims)” as the responsibility of this position, meaning the applicant is expected to be involved in romance scams. The workplace is located in the Dubai Industrial Park (DIP).

In the listing, the criminals are looking for workers from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or India fluent in English and experienced in conducting calculated conversations. For remuneration, the employees can choose from two schemes: an AED 2,000 monthly salary plus a 5% commission, or a 15% commission with no base salary (Jobs in Dubai, 2024).

FIGURE 20. SCREENSHOT OF A JOB LISTING IN DUBAI IN A TELEGRAM GROUP NAMED “JOBS IN DUBAI”. IN THIS GROUP, JOB LISTINGS FOR MODELS, SCAMMERS, AND ASSISTANTS IN SCAMMING HOTSPOTS, INCLUDING DUBAI, LAOS, CAMBODIA, AND MYANMAR, ARE FREQUENTLY SHARED.

18 ❤️ 迪拜工作 视频模特 东南亚生活助理 包养 包夜资
源多多 ❤️ 18

🇦🇪 迪拜工作 🇸🇰 模特 ❤️ 生活助理 选妃
💚 发单群 💙 合作话术

----- 🇹🇭 在泰国的妹子 -----

🇹🇭 泰国质量好 🇹🇭 学生妹子 🇹🇭 泰国会中文 🇹🇭 大妈
milf 类型 🇹🇭 可以嗨妹子 🇹🇭 人妖妹子 🇹🇭 在清迈的妹子
🇹🇭 在清莱的妹子 🇹🇭 在芭提雅的妹子 🇹🇭 在普吉岛的妹
子

🇨🇳 中国人 🇯🇵 日本 🇰🇷 韩国妹子

🇻🇳 越南人在曼谷 🇷🇺 俄罗斯 乌克兰

👤 男生活助理 🌍 非洲妹子

----- 特区 缅甸妹子 -----

🇨🇳 中国人在特区

🇹🇭 泰国人包夜 可以从清莱过去

🇹🇭 泰国人在泰国 可以去特区包月

----- 在迪拜妹子 -----

----- 在柬埔寨妹子 -----

----- 在越南妹子 -----

----- 在马来新加坡妹子 -----

咨询东南亚 🇸🇰 最大的妈咪 @kkqq112345

In this listing, as shown in figure 21, the recruiter is looking for “good quality” Thai girls with Chinese language skills who can “get high” to travel to Dubai and GTSEZ. Further down the listing, it is mentioned that Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, African, Russian, and Ukrainian girls based in Thailand are also welcomed.

FIGURE 21. SCREENSHOT OF A JOB LISTING IN DUBAI IN A TELEGRAM GROUP NAMED “LIFE ASSISTANT AND SUGAR DADDY”. THIS GROUP ADVERTISES JOB OPENINGS FOR GIRLS AROUND THE WORLD TO WORK IN THE GTSEZ AND DUBAI, AS WELL AS SHARES NUMEROUS PROFILES OF YOUNG GIRLS WITH GROUP MEMBERS.

According to the Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Dubai, a number of Chinese nationals have sought help from the Consulate-General, claiming that they were enticed to work in Dubai through lucrative job offers related to online media engagement and online game promotions. Upon arrival, their passports were confiscated, and they were coerced into engaging in scams and illegal online gambling activities. They faced restricted freedom of movement and serious threats to their personal safety (Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Dubai, 2021).

9. TYPES OF FRAUD IN DUBAI

Romance and Investment Scams

Romance scams are commonly followed by investment scams, with perpetrators typically transitioning from a romance scam to an investment scam targeting the same victims.

The term “pig butchering (杀猪盘, Shazhupan)”, is used when the scammer cultivates relationships with their victims, which is a popular type of **romance scam**. Initially, the scammer seeks to charm and entice the victim, often through scripted approaches via messaging apps, dating profiles, or social media interactions. This phase, referred to as the “fattening” process, involves building trust and rapport with the victim. However, the true intention of the scammer becomes apparent when the conversation transitions to financial

matters, and the victim is presented with a fraudulent investment opportunity, leading to the eventual “slaughtering” of their assets (Annison, 2023). In the context of Dubai compounds, it is reported that women are recruited as “models” to the compound, and they are required to do video calls with scam targets (Browning, 2024).

In Dubai, a mobile application “YOMIGT” has been particularly associated with systematic scamming. Scammers use traditional romance scam tactics to gain the trust of victims, convince them to download this app, and scam money from victims via this app. The following is an example of how a typical scam case works by using the YOMIGT app (Orsolya, 2024):

1. Scammers fabricate profiles on dating sites and apps, portraying themselves as affluent and alluring individuals adorned with symbols of opulence such as luxury cars, extravagant vacations, and ostentatious displays of wealth.
2. Next, scammers reach out to unsuspecting users on those platforms to establish romantic connections with them, leveraging rapid expressions of affection to forge emotional bonds.
3. Transitioning to private messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, scammers gain greater control over conversations, shielding their activities from scrutiny by dating site moderators. Subsequently, scammers pivot conversations towards lucrative investment

opportunities, enticing victims with promises of substantial returns derived from cryptocurrency trading.

4. Employing elaborate narratives and fabricated insider knowledge, scammers convince victims to open accounts on reputable exchanges like Binance or Coinbase to facilitate their schemes.

5. Finally, victims are directed to download the deceptive YOMIGT app, purportedly offering exclusive access to high-yield investment opportunities. However, the app is under the complete control of scammers, serving as a conduit for fraudulent activities aimed at siphoning off deposited funds.

Another example of an **investment scam** involves criminals gaining the trust of victims via a well-cultivated WeChat profile, and dope them into investing in crypto platforms (“Court hearing” 2023).

1. The criminals begin their operation by purchasing real-name WeChat accounts, often through illicit means, followed by the process of “yanghao” (養號), meaning the process of nurturing these accounts to create a semblance of authenticity by posting relevant content.

2. Subsequently, criminals acting as “salesmen”, in collaboration with professional social media marketing teams from China, drive people’s attention to these accounts, enticing victims to connect with them.

3. Building upon these connections, salesmen cultivate relationships with victims, gradually introducing them to online investment courses. The “lecturers” of these investment courses, impersonated by scammers, employ persuasive techniques to convince victims to invest and top up their accounts on fake platforms, purportedly based on fabricated “insider information.” To further ensnare victims, criminals manipulate codes from the backend of these platforms, rendering victims unable to withdraw their invested funds.

Task scams

A previous investigation and briefing produced by HRC highlights the emergence of task scams, a new type of fraud coming from compounds in Dubai, evidenced by screen recordings and screenshots (see figure 22) from a victim inside a compound in the city (see Brown, et al., 2023). The scamming operation begins with the scammers contacting potential victims over WhatsApp, offering lucrative part-time job opportunities involving simple tasks such as liking YouTube videos or giving reviews for a small commission. A report covering a case involving Indian victims and scammers, operating out of Dubai, revealed that the fraudsters offered victims 150-200 Rs (Indian Rupees) (approx. 1.80-2.40 USD) for task completion to build initial trust. Victims were then added to Telegram groups where they witnessed others allegedly earning significant sums, further convincing them to invest. However, once invested, victims found themselves trapped, with no returns and significant financial losses. One victim, an account manager for a private firm in India, ended up paying 32,000 Rs (approx. 380 USD) after initially earning money through completing tasks (Namboodiri, 2023).

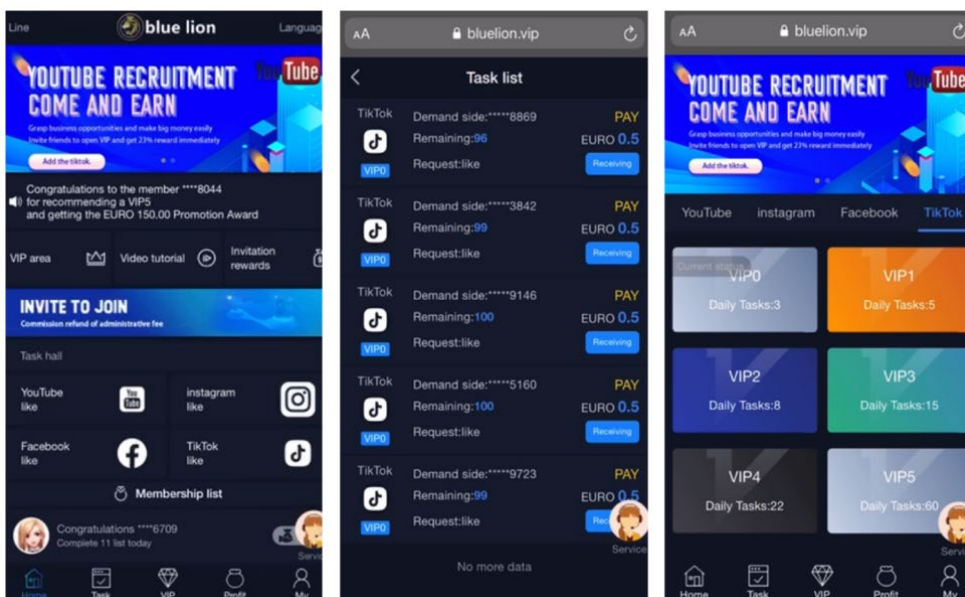


FIGURE 22. A SCREENSHOT OF AN APPLICATION USED TO CONDUCT TASK SCAMS, REVEALING THE ‘TASK LIST’ AND THE CORRESPONDING PAYMENTS USERS WILL ALLEGEDLY BE REWARDED WITH UPON COMPLETION (BROWN, ET AL., 2023).



CONCLUSION

HRC's findings presented throughout this report showcase the significance of both Laos and Dubai as trafficking destinations and transit countries in the broader criminal network of human trafficking for online fraud.

This report highlights the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone as a key hotspot for human trafficking within Laos, also noting the forced online scamming, sexual exploitation, and violence that occurs within this zone. Besides this, our findings uncover the holding capacity of the compounds in Laos to mirror those previously identified by HRC investigations. Our team was able to identify victims of 27 different nationalities trafficked into compounds in Laos, further evidencing the widespread impact of this crime.

With regard to Dubai, this report introduces seven alleged scamming compounds across Dubai and in neighbouring Ajman. Through the open source investigation our team was able to provide an overview of the forms of illicit activities operating in these areas, which our evidence suggests are run by Chinese-speaking criminals. Online fraud remains the key area of focus for the compounds, running romance and investment scams, along with tasks scams, on a global scale.

As crackdowns persist across the Asia region, in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Philippines, authorities must take appropriate measures to mitigate the shifting of operations to Laos and Dubai. However, in order to do this, further investigation into the criminal activities occurring in both locations is a crucial first step to broaden understanding on an international scale.

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