



INTERPOL

## CRIME TREND UPDATE: HUMAN TRAFFICKING-FUELED SCAM CENTRES

### Background

Since reports first emerged in 2021, INTERPOL has increasingly sounded the alarm on **human trafficking for the purpose of forced online fraud**. The quickly evolving crime trend is double-edged, exploiting two distinct sets of victims.

On the one side are victims drawn into human trafficking schemes, typically through false job ads, and detained in compounds where they are forced to carry out online social engineering scams. On the other side are the targets of those scams, who become victims of investment fraud, romance scams and frauds linked to cryptocurrency investing and online gambling.

### ONLINE SCAMS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING A DOUBLE-EDGED CRIME THREAT WITH TWO TYPES OF VICTIMS

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

Trafficked, extorted and forced to engage in online fraud

#### ONLINE SCAM CENTRES

#### ONLINE SCAM VICTIMS

Robbed of large sums through investment fraud, and other schemes

On top of forced criminality, the human trafficking victims in the scam centres are often subject to extortion through debt bondage, as well as beatings, sexual exploitation, torture and rape. The online scam victims, who are often located in different countries or regions, can suffer devastating financial and psychological impacts.

## Human trafficking-fueled scam centres An INTERPOL timeline



## From regional crime trend to global threat

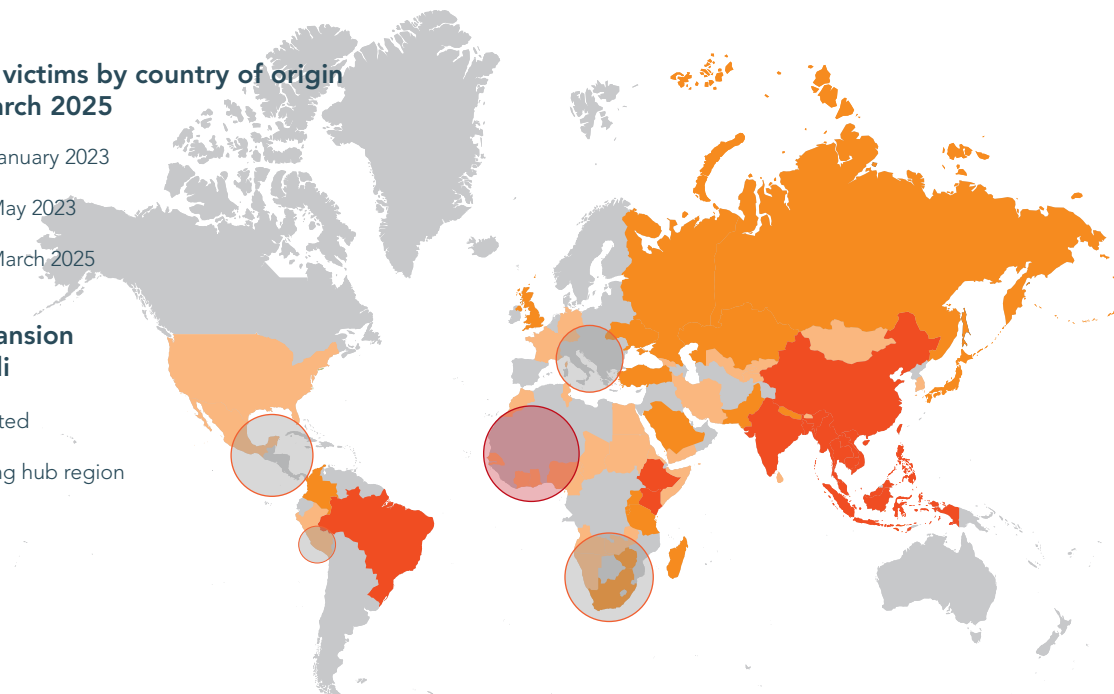
While cases of human trafficking for the purpose of forced online fraud have been identified as far back as 2015, INTERPOL analysis has shown the modus operandi to have expanded significantly both in scale and geographical scope since the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes referred to as a 'parallel pandemic', law enforcement witnessed a dramatic uptick in online scams throughout these years – a trend that has not slowed down.

### Human trafficking victims by country of origin January 2023 - March 2025

- As observed by January 2023
- As observed by May 2023
- As observed by March 2025

### Geographical expansion of modus operandi

- Similar MO reported
- Potential emerging hub region



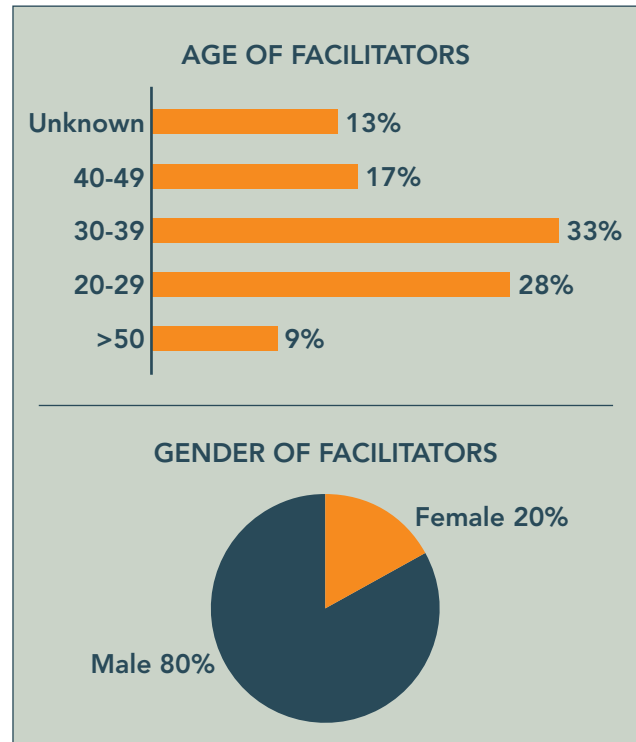
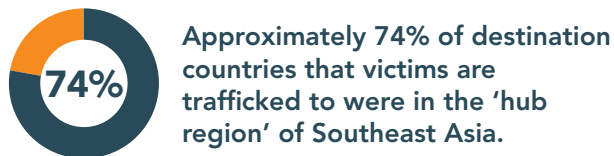
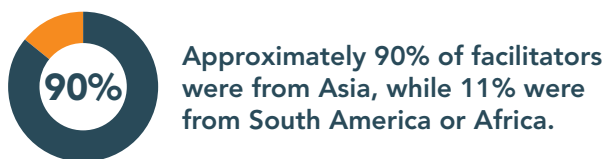
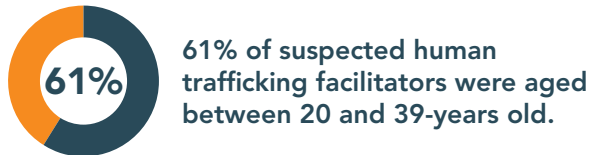
Initially, online scam centres were concentrated in Southeast Asia and most human trafficking victims were Chinese-speaking and sourced from Asia. The past three years, however, have seen victims trafficked to Southeast Asia from distant regions, including South America, Western Europe and Eastern Africa. Moreover, new scam centres have been reported in the Middle East, West Africa – which could be developing into a new regional hub – and Central America. This geographical expansion

has been facilitated both by transnational organized crime groups linked to Asia and through similar methods employed by local or regional groups.

In early 2024, an INTERPOL operation saw police dismantle a scam centre in Namibia, where 88 youths were forced to conduct financial fraud. Authorities seized 163 computers and 350 mobile phones, sharing the data they contained with INTERPOL for analysis.

## Criminal analysis – Human trafficking facilitators

Local human trafficking facilitators are among the main drivers helping sustain this criminal business model in Southeast Asia. Analysis of relevant INTERPOL Notices issued between 2021-2025, mostly Red Notices, has provided further insights into the criminals involved in trafficking victims to scam centres, particularly in countries most impacted by this trend.



## Future directions

Scam centres, and the forced criminalization of human trafficking victims, is a rapidly evolving phenomenon both in terms of its geographic expansion and the modus operandi itself. INTERPOL has specifically alerted law enforcement to future directions that this crime trend could take.

### USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI):



AI has the potential to transform both online financial fraud and human trafficking. The use of AI has been observed in a growing global number of scamming cases, many of which originate from online scam centres in Southeast Asia. AI has been reportedly used to generate convincing fake job ads that attract human trafficking victims as well as online photos or profiles through 'deepfake' technology for sextortion and romance scams, among other social engineering schemes.

### CRIME CONVERGENCE:



Reports analysed by INTERPOL show that the same routes used to traffic victims to scam centres can be used to traffic drugs, firearms and protected wildlife species. The Southeast Asian hub region that hosts the most scam centres is also a key hub for the trafficking of endangered species, such as tigers and pangolins, making criminal diversification likely.



## Recommendations

A coordinated international response is needed to tackle this rapidly globalizing threat. INTERPOL's response is threefold:



### INCREASED INFORMATION EXCHANGE

between law enforcement in the growing number of countries concerned by this trend. INTERPOL's specialist units transform this information into intelligence to help national authorities in the organization's 196 member countries track the routes, perpetrators and criminal methods behind the trend.



### STRENGTHENED PARTNERSHIPS

between law enforcement, non-governmental organizations – who are often a crucial point of contact for victims – and technology companies, whose platforms are exploited to scam both sets of victims. This can be channeled through established regional task forces to develop a comprehensive approach to protecting and assisting trafficking victims.



### ROBUST ENFORCEMENT

on the international level through more multi-country operations. INTERPOL is the only organization with a mandate to coordinate operations on a global level. Each year, INTERPOL-coordinated operations rescue thousands of human trafficking victims, arresting perpetrators and recovering illicit funds. INTERPOL's global stop payment mechanism I-GRIP has helped law enforcement intercept hundreds of millions of dollars in illicit funds.



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