

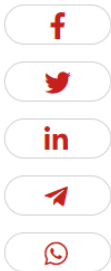


Scams, Human Trafficking Thrived at Bokor Mountain Behind Tycoon's Luxury Hotel

9 February 2023 10:30 AM | Jack Brook | Yan Huang and Sovann Sreypitch



The nine buildings owned by Sokimex Investment Group chairman Sok Kong allegedly house foreign nationals not allowed to leave the compound and forced to engage in scam operations. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)



Every day, crowds of tourists visit a popular sightseeing spot beside the five-star Thansur Sokha hotel and casino atop Bokor mountain to snap photos of temples, colonial ruins and the Kampot province coastline.

But behind the grand facade of the hotel owned by tycoon Sok Kong's **Sokimex Investment Group**, scam companies involved in human trafficking have found a refuge in a cluster of heavily guarded buildings, according to Taiwanese law enforcement, evidence from victims detained there, and advocates directly involved in rescues of victims from the compound.

The Bokor compound is a "stronghold" for online scam companies and human trafficking, said an officer with the Taiwan National Police Agency's Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB). In charge of rescuing Taiwanese nationals trapped in Cambodia, the officer requested anonymity to protect his safety.

Between August and December 2022, Taiwanese law enforcement **arrested** 12 people in Taiwan linked to the "Big Fatty" gang which allegedly trafficked 31 Taiwanese nationals. They were among the more than 430 Taiwanese nationals rescued from across Cambodia in 2022, the CIB officer said.

Two CIB officers confirmed to *CamboJA* the Big Fatty gang had trafficked victims to the compound at Preah Monivong Bokor National Park.

While the numerous human trafficking groups in nearby Sihanoukville have been **well-documented**, news of the Bokor scam compound has gone largely under the radar except for **references** in Chinese language media, especially in Taiwan, and a December Khmer language **report** in *Radio Free Asia*. Yet the compound, among many in Cambodia where an estimated **100,000 people** have been trafficked, was known to house scam groups as early as

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2018, when Chinese police arrested 91 Chinese nationals involved in online scams.

The alleged scam compound sites owned by Sokimex Investment Group outlined in red at Bokor mountain next to the Thansur Sokha hotel. (Jack Brook/Google Earth)

Following a seeming **crackdown** in Sihanoukville last year, some trafficking and scam rings appear to have shifted to Kampot's more isolated Bokor and have operated with relative impunity in Cambodia since then, two CIB officers told *CamboJA*.

Kampot's chief of police Major General Mao Chanmathurith acknowledged receiving more than a dozen complaints last year from foreigners, including Taiwanese nationals, saying they were being detained and tortured at Bokor. He claimed police visited the compound every time they received a complaint but never found a single case of forced confinement, abuse or online scams. He said the complaints were mere excuses by workers unsatisfied with their salaries.

Dozens of Taiwanese victims held at the Bokor compound were trafficked there against their knowledge, forcibly detained, violently beaten and, in the cases of some rescued victims, threatened with death if they spoke to the media, Humanity Research Consultancy (HRC) director Mina Chiang and Taiwanese trafficking survivor-turned-advocate Yu Tang told *CamboJA*. They say they assisted in rescuing five people from the compound last year.

"It's a perfect environment for the traffickers to hold victims," said Chiang, of the mountain-top compound surrounded by 140,000 hectares of forest. "Because the natural environment prevents them from getting away."

Sokimex's Scam "Stronghold"

Thansur Sokha security officers guard the entrance of the single winding road leading up to Bokor mountain, where the French colonial elite once went to escape the Cambodian heat.

Sokimex chairman Sok Kong, who made his fortune in petrol and built an empire of media, entertainment and hotels, received a 99-year concession to develop Preah Monivong Bokor National Park in 2007.

A security guard wearing a hat with the Sokha Hotel company logo stands at an entrance to the Bokor compound and orders reporters to leave, on January 18, 2023. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

Obscured from the view of visiting tourists passing by Sok Kong's 564-room Thansur Sokha hotel, a row of nine buildings houses primarily Chinese nationals, but also Vietnamese, Thai, Saudi Arabian, Malaysian and Indonesians, all of them confined inside the compound to do "online" work, according to hotel employees and vendors in the area.

"The workers there cannot leave," one hotel employee told *CamboJA*. "I don't really know why."

Barbed wire fences surround the compound and a German shepherd and Rottweiler bark viciously at approaching visitors. Security guards stand watch at every exit point, wearing uniforms bearing the Thansur Sokha hotel's red lotus flower logo superimposed with a white apsara dancer.

Barbed wire fences surround the nine buildings allegedly housing human trafficking and scam operations. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

Reached by phone, hotel general manager Sarin Sao said he had no idea about the activities in the cluster of buildings located 100 meters away from the Sokha hotel.

"I am only in charge of the hotel," Sao said. "This one [the compound] is managed by

Sokimex under the Sokimex Investment Group.”

Sao said the head of Sokimex security was in charge of managing the security guards guarding the compound. On the professional networking site LinkedIn, Vann Chantha is listed as Chief Security at Sokha Hotels and Resorts and Sokimex Group, but could not be reached for comment. Sao declined to provide further information.

Thansur Sokha hotel general manager Sarin Sao claimed he did not know about the alleged human trafficking and scam groups housed in the nine buildings owned by Sokimex Investment Group, located 100 meters from Thansur Sokha hotel. (Sarin Sao)

Thansur Sokha hotel is part of Sokha Hotel Co. Ltd, a subsidiary of Sokimex. Ministry of Commerce records list Sok Kong’s daughter, Sok Chantha, as director alongside her father. She is also a director of Sokimex.

CamboJA repeatedly tried to reach Sok Kong and Sok Chantha for comment through phone calls and emails. People answering calls to their phone numbers and those of their assistants declined to identify themselves or claimed to not be involved with Sok Kong or the Sokha hotel.

Svay Vuthy, chief legal and corporate affairs officer at Sokimex, declined to talk with *CamboJA* when reached by phone and ignored subsequent Telegram messages. A letter of detailed questions delivered to Sokimex headquarters in Phnom Penh went unanswered.

Oknha Sok Kong made his fortune in the petroleum business and has expanded to hotels and entertainment under his conglomerate Sokimex Investment Group. (Sokha Hotel's Facebook)

Sok Kong's daughter Sok Chantha is vice chairwoman of Sokimex Investment Group and a director of its subsidiary Sokha Hotel Co., Ltd. which owns the Thansur Sokha hotel. (Sokimex Investment Group's Facebook)

Maj. Gen. Chanmathurith, the police chief of Kampot province, told *CamboJA* there had not been a single case of anyone detained or tortured on Bokor mountain but acknowledged he had helped Taiwanese nationals leave the site last year. He said when police received complaints about Bokor they always contacted the compound in advance before visiting.

“They [people inside the compound] filed the complaint because they just want to change their job to another place and there is no detention or torture and in 2022 we went to check those nine buildings owned by the Sokimex company,” he said.

“There they have Thai nationals and Bangladeshi nationals,” he continued. “All of them filed the complaint that they were detained and tortured and when we went to check there we found nothing, just that they want to change their job to get a higher salary.”

The heavily guarded entrances did not concern Chanmathurith, who said it was “normal” for a workplace and added the companies in the compound were legal gambling companies.

“If that place has detention or torture, why could the [victims] call me?” he added. “They wouldn’t allow them to use a phone if it was a case of detention — no one could use the phone and call the police.”

The backside of Tycoon Sok Kong's Thansur Sokha hotel, located around 100 meters from the alleged scam compound site, on November 25, 2022. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

One victim who was trafficked to Bokor told *CamboJA* that while he was eventually given his phone back, he saw that others who contacted the police were punished with electric shocks or sold elsewhere. Local police worked with the scam bosses, he claimed, a statement echoed by the CIB officers and advocates working in Cambodia.

Cambodian police and local officials have been known to **ignore or dismiss** scam-related human trafficking cases and even conspire with scam compounds to help criminal groups evade detection, said the Taiwanese CIB officer. Last year, in its 2022 Trafficking in Persons **report**, the U.S. State Department downgraded Cambodia to the lowest tier, noting that “authorities did not investigate or hold criminally accountable any officials involved in the large majority of credible reports.”

The CIB officer recalled meeting undercover with a group of Sihanoukville scam bosses and witnessing them receive a call from police alerting them the next day there would be a crackdown on their compound.

Chiang, of the rescue group HRC, said police have been resistant to rescuing victims at Bokor.

“Even with the knowledge we have that more victims are there it is very difficult to rescue them there without their details — names, identity numbers — because it always has to go through some communication with the Cambodian side,” Chiang said. “And it’s impossible to mobilize the Cambodian police to crack down on the whole building, it’s very much based on individual information.”

Ransoms are often demanded for the release of victims. Otherwise, they may be sold to another company. Even after rescue, the impact and threat of violence can haunt victims. One of the two young Taiwanese women HRC rescued from Bokor was beaten so severely she nearly went blind, Tang said.

“Before the two girls left, the Bokor mountain fraud company specifically explained that they could not mention anything when they returned to Taiwan, otherwise they would find someone to kill them in Taiwan,” Tang said.

The CIB officer showed *CamboJA* screenshots of messages with several other victims and their families who sent him videos, photos and pinned locations revealing they were held at the Bokor compound.

Text messages sent to an officer with Taiwan's Criminal Investigation Bureau sharing details of the victim's confinement, such as their room number and building location within the Bokor compound behind Thansur Sokha hotel on Bokor mountain. The messages have been blurred to protect identity. (Taiwan Criminal Investigation Bureau)

A victim of trafficking sends their location, clearly identifying the Sokimex-owned compound behind the Thansur Sokha hotel on Bokor mountain in Kampot province. The messages have been blurred to protect identity. (Taiwan Criminal Investigation Bureau)

He said to rescue these victims, he had to send direct Facebook messages to Minister of Interior Sar Kheng, who has a team devoted to rescuing victims of scam compounds.

A screenshot of messages about a victim at Bokor was sent by the CIB officer in November 2022 to Sar Kheng's team — who within an hour responded “Ok” in Chinese — and shared with *CamboJA*.

Ministry of Interior spokesperson Khieu Sopheak said he had “no idea” about a scam compound at Bokor and claimed no Taiwanese citizens had requested help there. When speaking of a series of police raids on scam compounds in October, Minister of Interior Sar Kheng **did not mention Kampot province**.

National police spokesperson Chhay Kim Khoeun did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Chou Bun Eng, the secretary of state and permanent vice president of the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking, has stated that she is unaware of the cases at Bokor. Rather than answering reporters' questions, she said there were many fewer

Taiwanese citizens trafficked to Cambodia than the **estimated 5,000 reported** by Taiwanese media.

Guards keep a list of license plates for cars allowed to enter the alleged scam compound at Bokor, seen here on January 18, 2023. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

Escape from Bokor

After getting fined \$6,000 for drunk driving and without a job, Jiahao, in his early thirties, badly needed money. In March 2022, the Taiwanese citizen saw a Facebook post advertising an ambiguous, computer-related job and the \$3,000 a month salary got his attention.

Like the many others tricked and trafficked into coming to Cambodia, Jiahao arrived at a Sihanoukville compound in April — which looked nothing like the photos his recruiter had sent online — and discovered he would be joining a scam company. The only way to leave, he was told, was to pay a ransom.

“If you don’t do the job, you will be locked up in a small dark room and beaten, so I could only do it [scam people] at that time,” he said.

Though Jiahao still had his phone, he was too afraid to call the police or others for help after seeing others beaten with electric batons or sold elsewhere.

In mid-2022, as Taiwanese media began covering Cambodia’s scam compounds and Sihanoukville gained international media attention, rescues of Taiwanese nationals became easier, said Yu Tang, a former Taiwanese victim of trafficking who declined to share her full name for her safety.

A guarded entrance to the alleged scam compound at Bokor mountain on January 18, 2023. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

In late September, Jiahao and 30 others from his compound were transferred by bus to the compound behind Thansur Sokha hotel atop Bokor. Several other online scam groups joined soon after, run by bosses from China's Sichuan province, he said.

Jiahao worked in a version of the now infamous **pig-butcher** scams, developing romantic relationships with victims through chat platforms like Telegram before convincing them to invest in cryptocurrency assets, which would ultimately be seized by the scam company. He focused mainly on overseas Chinese in the United States, conversing with would-be victims across time zones from 10 p.m. until noon the following day.

The corporate logo of Sokimex Investment Group subsidiary Sokha Hotel Co., Ltd displayed inside the Thansur Sokha hotel. The logo also appeared on the uniforms of guards at the entrance of the alleged scam compound. (Thansur Sokha hotel/Facebook)

Both in Sihanoukville and at Bokor, Jiahao and the other workers would receive only one day off a month, where they were taken to a restaurant in the compound and senior managers treated them to drinks.

No one was ever allowed out of the compound at Bokor, Jiahao recalled, echoing accounts from Sokha hotel employees.

Jiahao said there could be little doubt that the hotel itself was connected to the scam company's operations.

"They [the scam groups] seemed to have a treasury in the hotel when they first moved there," he said. "If they needed any money in the compound, they would call the hotel, and then say they were going 'to get the money.'"

A rottweiler guards the entrance of the alleged scam compound at Bokor on January 18, 2023. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

In August, Jiahao braved a call to his mother back in Taiwan, pleading for her to phone the police. After Jiahao was transferred to Bokor, he was able to reach the CIB officer in September, who then contacted Minister of Interior Sar Kheng.

Jiahao shared his location at Bokor with the CIB officer in messages reviewed by *CamboJA*. Three days after Sar Kheng was contacted, Jiahao and another Taiwanese worker were removed from the compound.

Before letting Jiahao go, Bokor compound's scam bosses showed him his chat records with Taiwanese law enforcement. Jiahao believes Cambodian police shared them directly with the scam bosses.

Back in Taiwan, Jiahao found a job as a truck driver in Taiwan. He said he is grateful to be back with his mother as her only child. Despite risks for sharing his story, Jiahao believed more people needed to know about Bokor and the operations of scam companies.

"I think this kind of thing should be known to the public," he said. "Otherwise people will still be deceived in the future."

The Downfall of the Big Fatty Gang

By the fall of last year, prices for Chinese-speaking scam workers had risen from \$10,000 to \$20,000 as the supply diminished, a second CIB officer who requested anonymity said. He estimated the majority of Taiwanese victims were duped into coming to Cambodia, while a smaller number knowingly accepted jobs in the scam operations.

A man nicknamed Big Fatty arrived at the Bokor mountain compound in February 2022, and recruited another Taiwanese boss known as "Brother An" to come to Cambodia and help lead a human trafficking group. Taiwanese media CTWANT reported Brother An's real name as Liu Zheyi, and he remains at large in Cambodia, the CIB officer said. The more senior bosses, from mainland China, are unknown to Taiwanese police.

Determining whether a foreign national was a victim or willing participant can be difficult, Taiwanese police said.

Between August and December 2022, Taiwanese police arrested an unidentified Taiwanese national known as "Big Fatty" along with 11 others in a criminal group charged with trafficking 31 Taiwanese nationals to the scam compound at Bokor mountain. (Taiwanese National Police Agency)

Big Fatty, whose identity was not fully revealed by police, tricked people into traveling to Cambodia by using Facebook job ads and channeling the victims through fixers on the ground in Taiwan. They prepared passports and brought victims to the airport, in what the officer described as "a well-organized human trafficking group" of 12 people. The group also laundered cryptocurrency from scam victims through the black market in Taiwan.

Big Fatty was arrested upon his return to Taiwan in September, though his phone had already been wiped clean and he had little information to offer police, the second CIB officer said.

The CIB officers both said they have not received new information about more Taiwanese victims or Taiwanese scam groups operating in the Bokor compound since the arrests of Big Fatty and his group.

But as accounts from hotel employees and recent visits to the Bokor compound strongly suggest, clandestine activities and the confinement of foreign nationals remain ongoing at the secluded site.

"I don't think the Cambodian police are really going to crack down," the first CIB officer told *CamboJA*. "Instead, they quickly notify the people of the online scam company to leave as soon as possible, creating a false impression that it seems to have been cleared, and then wait until the time has passed, waiting for the high-level to stop focusing on this matter. And then, these people come back."

The view from the summit of Bokor mountain near the site of the alleged scam compound, with Sihanoukville province, the site of many scam operations, visible across the bay. (Jack Brook/CamboJA)

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Big Fatty, Bokor, Brother An, human trafficking, online scam, pig-butcher, Sarin Sao, Sok Chantha, Sok Kong, Sokimex Investment Group, Taiwanese, Thansur Sokha hotel

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