

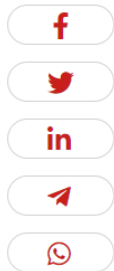


Year in Review: Human Trafficking, Cyber Scams and the Government's Response

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A photo posted by Interior Minister Sar Kheng on his Facebook on April 26, showing reports of alleged scam and human trafficking related cases and locations of alleged compounds. (Photo: Sar Kheng Facebook)



After initially denying the proliferation of human trafficking and scam compounds in the country, the Cambodian government has since last year repeatedly said it is cracking down on the rise of modern slavery and cyber scams.

In 2022, "serious crimes of fraud in Cambodia emerged...as well as the use of people held against their will, exploited for their labor and used as tools for online scams", Hun Sen said on September 29. "Do not let Cambodia become a haven of crime, a place of money laundering, a place of human trafficking."

The government's acknowledgement of the human trafficking and crimes associated with scam compounds in Cambodia came after sustained media coverage and the US State Department's decision to downgrade Cambodia's rank to Tier 3 in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report last July.

A country classified as Tier 3 is considered as failing to meet "minimum standards" for combating human trafficking.

While top Cambodian government officials vowed to fight human trafficking and scams, Cambodia remains a Tier 3 country nearly one year later, following the release of the latest TIP report on Thursday.

"It [the TIP report] should not be used as a reflection of Cambodia's overall anti-trafficking efforts," Chou Bun Eng, Vice Chairperson of the National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT), told CamboJA. "We are working hard."

CamboJA reviewed a range of government statements, media reports and public records to track the cyber scam industry and authorities' responses since July 2022.

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A photo posted by Interior Minister Sar Kheng on his Facebook on April 26, showing reports of alleged scam and human trafficking related cases and locations of alleged compounds. (Photo: Sar Kheng Facebook)

July 2022 to June 2023

July 13, 2022

A Vice World News [investigation](#) shares testimony from an American citizen who lost \$2.5 million from a so-called “pig-butcher” romance scam. The report traces global scam operations to industrial-scale compounds in Sihanoukville and other parts of Cambodia.

July 14, 2022

A Voice of Democracy report [exposed a Telegram group chat](#) called “White Shark Channel” in which human beings were bought and sold for organized crime linked to scam compounds. The chat had more than 5,000 subscribers.

July 20, 2022

Following nearly one year of reporting led by local and regional media, the U.S. State Department [downgraded](#) Cambodia to Tier 3 in its Trafficking in Persons report. The report cited continuous labor exploitation and cyber crimes, as well as reports of foreigners being trafficked into the country to work in online fraud and gambling operations.

August 1, 2022

The Indonesian Embassy worked with Cambodian authorities to rescue 62 Indonesian nationals from captivity in Sihanoukville compounds, Indonesian media outlet Tempo [reports](#).

August 16, 2022

Taiwanese police estimate that [at least 2,000 Taiwanese](#) are still stranded in Cambodia against their will, but add that this number could be as high as 5,000.

August 18, 2022

More than 42 Vietnamese workers escape from the Koh Thom casino complex in Kandal province in Cambodia, as seen in the [video](#) posted by media outlet [VnExpress](#). The video shows the workers jumping into a river and chased by guards swinging metal rods.

August 22, 2022

At the Office of the Council of Ministers’ conference, NCCT Vice Chairperson Chou Bun Eng says she is upset that criminals have engaged in human trafficking in Cambodia. But she adds that this is also a global issue and expresses disappointment with international NGOs and media outlets for blaming Cambodia alone.

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“For us who work to combat human trafficking, we are in great pain, because we think that we are doing our best to protect people from being trafficked,” Bun Eng said. “But in the end, they use Cambodian territory to commit crimes.”

“Cambodia is not a country which has the full capacity to eradicate all kinds of crimes, but we are making it a priority to stop it and make Cambodia safer for everyone,” she added.

August 26, 2022

Interior Minister Sar Kheng acknowledges foreign nationals have been trafficked to Cambodia to work in online scam compounds, [VOD reports](#).

August 30, 2022

Chen Baorong, a Chinese national who had been helping rescue workers trapped in Cambodian scam compounds, received a [two-year prison sentence](#) on incitement charges from the Preah Sihanouk Provincial Court, [VOD reports](#). He had been involved in rescuing an alleged “blood slave” from a Sihanoukville compound and was charged with incitement after Cambodian authorities claimed the story was fabricated.

September 13, 2022

ProPublica publishes an [in-depth investigation](#) into Cambodia’s scam compounds, owned by politically well-connected Cambodian businessmen such as the K99 Group, led by Rithy Raksmei.

September 19, 2022

Interior Minister Sar Kheng led a meeting to discuss anti-trafficking approaches. He [said](#) that officials must rise to the challenge of combating trafficking and that “illegal gambling of all kinds is the most vicious social cancer.”

“Illegal gambling cannot be a substitute for legal investment,” he warned. “The sudden influx of the wrong people cannot replace good professionals and tourists.”

On his website, Sar Kheng [stated](#) the Interior Ministry had received a total of 289 complaints linked to human trafficking in the past month. More than 200 complaints came from Sihanoukville province, but other complaints came from Banteay Meanchey (2) Pursat (4), Svay Rieng (18), Koh Kong (5), Pailin (1), Oddar Meanchey (14), Kandal (18), Siem Reap (1) and Phnom Penh (14).

“At first, we did not trust these complaints completely, but through subsequent crime bust operations, about 95 percent were true,” Sar Kheng said.

September 22, 2022

Over 1,000 Vietnamese citizens who were tricked into illegally working in Cambodia are rescued following raids from local authorities, [Vietnamese media report](#).

September 27, 2022

Cambodian authorities [crack down](#) on some alleged scam compounds in Phnom Penh, raiding more than 10 condominiums, hotels and other buildings, [VOD reports](#). Police said they released more than 1,480 foreign nationals.

September 29, 2022

Prime Minister Hun Sen hosts a national interfaith forum against human trafficking with the motto “Please do not use Cambodia as a destination for human trafficking in persons.”

The motto is a call to action to clamp down against all corrupt activities committed in Cambodia, Hun Sen said.

This year, “serious crimes of fraud in Cambodia emerged...as well as the use of people held against their will, exploited for their labor and used as tools for online scams,” Hun Sen said. “Do not let Cambodia become a haven of crime, a place of money laundering, a place of human trafficking.”

"I do not consider Cambodia as the best country in the world. But I urge other people not to use this opportunity to say that Cambodia is the worst country," he added.

October 4, 2022

Some Cambodian authorities are extorting bribes from victims rescued from scam compounds and held in detention centers until they pay fees to officers, Vice World News reports.

October 13, 2022

Cambodian authorities have clamped down on some cyber gangs by raiding their compounds and freeing more than a thousand enslaved workers, but human rights groups say the gangs have moved their operations to other areas, Nikkei Asia reports.

October 27, 2022

More than 800 Vietnamese people return home after raids on Cambodian compounds, VN Express reports.

October 28, 2022

Police raid scam compounds across 10 provinces after receiving more than 600 complaints through a hotline set up through the Interior Ministry, VOD reports.

November 1, 2022

As many as 100,000 people are being held captive by Chinese-led gangs in Cambodia operating with relative immunity, the Los Angeles Times reports.

November 14, 2022

Following raids on Sihanoukville compounds, police say scam operations appear to be transitioning to other provinces such as Koh Kong, VOD reports.

December 29, 2022

The Eternal Diamond Casino, owned by tycoon Try Pheap and situated in the MDS Thmor Da special economic zone where VOD and Al Jazeera reported alleged human trafficking and scam operations, has its casino license renewed.

RSX Investment Co., Ltd.'s KB casino is granted a "temporary casino license" renewal on the same day. The casino, part of an area known as the "Kaibo compound," had been repeatedly identified as an alleged site of human trafficking and scam operations.

December 31, 2022

Interior Minister Sar Kheng states the police have responded to more than 600 requests from over 1,590 foreigners representing 16 nationalities since August 18.

January 20, 2023

Authorities say they have recorded 707 reports of human trafficking in all forms into a central database, leading to the detention of 120 suspects, the Phnom Penh Post reports.

January 23, 2023

Authorities leading a crackdown on undocumented foreign workers said that they faced difficulties in visiting and inspecting sites where undocumented foreign nationals were working and "took a soft approach" because "the employers were investors," VOD reports.

"There was noncooperation, mostly at sites of illegality. ... They did not allow us to go in, and when authorities arrived, they shut the door and stopped us from getting inside," immigration head Kirth Chantharith said.

February 7, 2023

Taiwanese police say that the Thansur Sokha hotel, owned by a well-connected Cambodian tycoon Sok Kong and situated atop Kampot province's Bokor mountain, is a "stronghold" for

online scam companies and human trafficking, [CamboJA reports](#).

Kampot province police chief Maj. Gen. Mao Chanmathurith acknowledged receiving more than a dozen complaints from foreign nationals at the Bokor compound but claimed there were no cases of human trafficking or other criminal activity.

“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,” he said.

February 12, 2023

Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the [shutdown of local media outlet VOD](#), after he previously demanded an apology for an article about humanitarian aid relief which he claimed was inaccurate. VOD also published more than 120 news articles and investigations covering human trafficking and scam operations since November 2021.

February 25, 2023

Cambodia is [removed](#) from the “grey list” of the global money-laundering and terrorist-financing watchdog Financial Action Task Force and no longer subject to increased monitoring.

March 1, 2023

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs says it has rescued nearly [8,000 Cambodian citizens](#) from human trafficking in surrounding countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

March 8, 2023

A [BBC documentary](#) reports on the proliferation of pig butchering scams in Cambodia and follows the escape of a Chinese national from inside Sihanoukville’s Huang Le compound, which is registered as Majestic 2 casino and owned by tycoon Kuong Li. The report also includes testimony from an alleged scam leader claiming that compound owners pay bribes to authorities to ensure scam operations are protected from being shut down.

March 21, 2023

A local journalist [reports](#) three people fell from Sihanoukville buildings in four days.

March 23, 2023

Interior Minister Sar Kheng, who presided over the [Ceremony of the National Report on Combating Human Trafficking 2022 and 2023 Work Targets](#), said “Do not be proud of the anti-human trafficking results, but ensure that human trafficking crimes are brought to justice and the victims are properly rescued.”

In its [2022 anti-trafficking report](#), the NCCT claimed that police [cracked down](#) on 166 cases in comparison to 359 in 2021. They said 202 suspects were sent to municipal court, involving 33 foreigners.

NCCT confirmed that 358 victims were rescued, involving 265 women, all of which were sent to the Department of Social Affairs and their families.

Sar Kheng claimed that cases in Sihanoukville had decreased significantly but acknowledged new crimes were still emerging in the city and across other provinces.

“We urged the public to invest in businesses but not fraudulent ones, screening from illegal acts like human trafficking, sex crimes and so forth,” Keng said.

April 5, 2023

Vice World News reports on the [expansion of scam compounds](#) across the region, including throughout Poipet city on the border with Thailand.

“Inside there are hundreds of workers who cannot leave. I’ve seen this with my own eyes,” one former security guard said of a compound in Poipet.

April 12, 2023

A Chinese national named Ko, who had been a scam worker, is kidnapped and handcuffed to a bed by a criminal gang at the newly licensed Xing Tian Di casino owned by tycoon Rithy Raksmei's K99 Group.

While the victim is still in captivity, Raksmei opens another Sihanoukville hotel as Royal Gendarmerie Sao Sokha and Preah Sihanouk's governor Kuoch Chamroeun **attend** the ribbon cutting ceremony, Cyber Scam Monitor reports.

"Right after [the September crackdowns] happened the compounds did make some changes, but as more time has passed and it seems people have forgotten, the companies are slowly returning to their previous ways of operating," said Ko, the victim. "They might be afraid to buy and sell people now, but companies are slowly starting to detain and restrict people's freedom again."

April 18, 2023

Sihanoukville authorities issue a letter claiming they "completely dismiss" the BBC's March documentary and claim the testimony from victims of human trafficking was "baseless."

The compound's owner Kuong Li, who has not faced legal consequences, also told **CamboJA**: "I just rented the land and casino to a Chinese national, however, it does not matter who is the owner."

But Preah Sihanouk deputy governor Long Dimanche did not deny the validity of the footage and reporting in the video, only saying it happened a few months before authorities raided the compound.

April 20, 2023

A young woman is **found beheaded** in her room in Svay Rieng's Bavet city. She worked for a hotel and casino which included "call center" operations and was located across the street from the Moc Bai complex in Bavet province, where **numerous reports of trafficking and scams** have surfaced.

May 18, 2023

Interior Minister Sar Kheng says on his **Facebook** that from January to March there were 128 requests for intervention compared to 605 requests for help in the first quarter of 2022, a 78% decline. Many of the recent requests were from Oddar Meanchey, Koh Kong, Kandal and Preah Sihanouk provinces, he said.

Regarding allegations of human trafficking and illegal online activities, "we will continue reviewing the requests for intervention [even at locations] that have been temporarily closed in order to evaluate and continue the search [regarding] requests to ensure the absolute safety of foreigners," he said.

May 26, 2023

Cambodian National Police **announced** a raid on a company in Pursat province after receiving a request for a Chinese woman who claimed she had been detained and forced to work inside tycoon Try Pheap's MDS special economic zone. Police said the woman had not been allowed to resign and had been asked to keep working until the company could find a replacement, Cyber Scam Monitor **reported**.

June 7, 2023

Interpol **issues** a warning about the spread of a global human trafficking crisis linked to online scam centers "concentrated in Cambodia." The agency said that victims have been found from South America, East Africa and Western Europe.

"What began as a regional crime threat has become a global human trafficking crisis," said Jürgen Stock, Interpol's Secretary General.

"Just about anyone in the world could fall victim to either the human trafficking or the online scams carried out through these criminal hubs," he added. "Much stronger international police cooperation is needed to stop this crime trend from spreading further."

June 10, 2023

A Chinese national is found dead and stuffed in a suitcase with an ID card for Jinbei 1. Jinbei 1 is a casino frequently cited by trafficking victims as a location where online scam operations occur.

The victim lived at a Phnom Penh compound where “people go in but cannot come out” according to a neighbor, while local authorities said the compound was allowed to remain in operation because it was owned by a high ranking official, [CamboJA reports](#).

June 14, 2023

Thai police arrested an interpreter and “close aide” of the Chinese leader of a phone-scam gang based in Cambodia’s Koh Kong province after he escaped and fled back to Thailand, [the Bangkok Post reports](#).

June 16, 2023

The US State Department maintains CamboJA’s Tier 3 ranking for failing to meet “minimum standards” to combat human trafficking.

“Law enforcement failed to effectively address forced labor in cyber scam operations,” a U.S. Embassy spokesperson told CamboJA.

Prior to the report’s release, NCCT Vice Chairperson Chou Bun Eng tells CamboJA that the TIP report’s rankings are “illogical” and “arbitrary.”

She says that Cambodian authorities at all levels are working vigorously to combat crime and have collaborated with other countries and international organizations to ensure victims can be released.

“Even though we are busy working, we do want to rest,” she said. “We are working hard. Perpetrators do not allow us to live peacefully.”

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