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COMPOUND ABUSES:

Human Trafficking, Forced Criminality, and Abuse in Myanmar's Border Areas

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Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, criminal networks, which had already become embedded in Myanmar's border areas, pivoted to online scamming, leading to an increase in human trafficking to Myanmar and other countries in the region.¹ Although the majority of victims were originally trafficked from mainland China, Malaysia, and Taiwan due to their ability to scam victims in Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, criminal networks also started preying on victims from a wider range of countries when they expanded their scamming operations to target a more global demographic. This includes Myanmar men, women, and children, who became increasingly vulnerable to human trafficking because of the loss of livelihoods, and dramatic increase in poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews conducted by this analytical unit have found that international travel restrictions and border closures drove higher numbers of Myanmar nationals to seek out livelihood opportunities in areas controlled by the United Wa State Army and the Kokang Border Guard Force, despite risks of being subjected to forced labour, exploitation, and other abuses. It is important to emphasise that scam centres do not exist in a vacuum; they are located in border areas where a variety of other criminal enterprises operate, including unregulated casinos, brothels and online pornography businesses, money laundering, drug production and trafficking, and illegal wildlife trade.² Women and girls from Myanmar and third countries have been trafficked to these areas and subjected to sexual exploitation. Myanmar men, women, and children working in auxiliary roles in these areas, such as accountants or factory workers, have also been subjected to forced labour, exploitation and human rights abuses.

The February 2021 military coup decimated Myanmar's capacity to prevent human trafficking, provide protection and assistance to trafficking victims, or prosecute perpetrators. With the launch of the State

Administrative Council (SAC) in the place of a legitimate government, local civil society organisations and international responders lost key law enforcement and policymaker interlocutors able to carry out anti-trafficking activities. The decline in the rule of law and changes in conflict dynamics provided more space for illicit industries to operate and increased Myanmar's appeal to criminal networks in the region. By August 2023, the United Nations estimated that at least 120,000 people across Myanmar may be held in situations where they are forced to carry out online scams.³ According to the United States Institute of Peace, nationals of more than 46 countries have been trafficked to Myanmar.⁴ Although the trafficking of foreign nationals has garnered more attention from the international community, the increased vulnerability of Myanmar men, women, and children to human trafficking and exploitation by criminal networks and other actors has received comparatively less attention.

In recent months, China has exerted growing pressure on the SAC and armed actors involved in online scamming operations, prompting the United Wa State Army to detain high-ranking Wa officials and hand over more than 1,200 people arrested for involvement in online scamming to Chinese authorities in September 2023.⁵ In October 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched Operation 1027, targeting a range of valuable SAC positions in Shan State, including key border crossings, as well as the criminal hub of Laukkaing.⁶ Framed as a crackdown on online scamming, this armed offensive has prompted raids on scam centres that have reportedly liberated hundreds of people and the widespread arrests of those involved in criminal networks in Laukkaing by Chinese law enforcement.⁷ Trafficking victims and migrant workers from Myanmar and third countries are in dire need of critical support services to return to their home countries or communities, as well as long-term medical, psychosocial and livelihood support.

¹ Lindsey Kennedy and Nathan Paul Southern. "Modern slavery in the Mekong's casinos." Global Initiative for Transnational Organized Crime. July 2022.

² International Crisis Group. "Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong." August 2023.

³ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Online Scam Operations and Trafficking into Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia: Recommendations for a Human Rights Response." August 2023.

⁴ Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower. "A Criminal Cancer Spreads in Southeast Asia." United States Institute of Peace, June 2023.

⁵ AP. "Powerful ethnic militia in Myanmar repatriates 1,200 Chinese suspected of involvement in cybercrime." September 2023.

⁶ Community Analysis Support System, Center for Operational Analysis and Research. "Three Brotherhood Alliance Attacks SAC.", October 2023.

⁷ Ingyin Naing. "Myanmar Rebel Offensive Helps China's Cybercrime Crackdown". Voice of America. November 2023.

This paper explores the dynamics of human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality, and sexual exploitation in Myanmar's border areas. It also analyses how civil society organisations have stepped up to coordinate rescues and provide support to victims of human trafficking. Given the resilience of criminal networks to limited interventions, governance personnel involved in law enforcement in Thailand, China, and third countries must make coordinated efforts to investigate and hold accountable the criminals responsible for human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality, and sexual exploitation. Relevant authorities must adopt a rights-based approach to ensure that victims of trafficking, exploitation, and abuse are swiftly identified and receive critical support services to ensure the maximum protection of their rights.

Key Recommendations

1. **Adopt a comprehensive rights-based approach to the ongoing crisis of human trafficking in Myanmar, to ensure that victims of human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality, and sexual exploitation from Myanmar and third countries are swiftly identified, receive the greatest possible support and ensure the maximum protection of their human rights.**
2. **Advocate to governance, law enforcement and judicial actors in Thailand, China, and third countries to make coordinated efforts to investigate and hold accountable criminal networks, as well as brokers, and other actors responsible for human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality, and sexual exploitation.**
3. **Call on authorities in neighbouring countries to improve the identification, repatriation or return, protection, and rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking, forced criminality, forced labour, and sexual exploitation.**
4. **Support EAOs, the NUG, and other key stakeholders in promoting understanding of human trafficking and strengthening their capacity to identify trafficking victims, deliver critical services, and coordinate with relevant stakeholders to support their repatriation.**
5. **Allocate greater resources to local responders in Myanmar, Thailand, China, and countries of origin for the provision of crucial support services to victims of human trafficking.**
6. **Ensure that third-country nationals who have been trafficked to Myanmar have access to diplomatic representatives**
7. **Ensure that the anti-trafficking response is victim-centred and trauma-sensitive.** Invest in MHPSS capacity building among key CSO and diplomatic actors.
8. **Ensure that coordination mechanisms are inclusive of a wide variety of actors involved in the anti-trafficking response in Myanmar,** including representatives from a diverse range of NGOs, CSOs and CBOs, as well as religiously-affiliated and parahita groups, ethnic service providers and EAO actors. Support low-visibility, sub-national and hyper-local coordination efforts, in order to safely promote a stronger response to trafficking across highly volatile areas, including those affected by armed violence.
9. **Support the development of a transnational referral mechanism bringing together civil society organisations in Myanmar, neighbouring countries, and countries of origin,** to facilitate their efforts to ensure authorities swiftly identify and provide support services in each location. .
10. **Expand protection programming throughout Myanmar, neighbouring countries, and countries of origin,** mainstreaming screenings for victims of trafficking, forced criminality, forced labour and sexual exploitation across programmes.
11. **Scale up humanitarian and livelihood assistance to support displaced people and local communities throughout Myanmar,** to reduce vulnerability to human trafficking and forced labour.

Methodology

By definition, human trafficking networks are informal, clandestine, and illegal transnational structures. As a result, this research is primarily based on informal and semi-structured interviews, informed by a grounded theory approach to data gathering and analysis.

In 2023, this analytical unit interviewed people who had direct insights into human trafficking dynamics in Laukkaing, Tachileik, and Lashio, as well as in the Myawaddy and Shwe Kokko border area. To get a better understanding of the overall dynamics of human trafficking, this analytical unit also conducted in-depth interviews with service providers situated in Myanmar and Thailand, as well as in countries of origin, to understand how they are supporting victims of trafficking and what challenges they are facing. Since this report is based on a small sample size relative to the massive scale of human trafficking in Myanmar, its observations should not be assumed to be representative.

This paper builds on the findings of previous research on this subject, including those published by the United States Institute for Peace, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, as well as extensive investigations by local media and civil society organisations in Myanmar and Southeast Asia. Although this report also draws upon earlier publications on this topic produced by this analytical unit, such as [Evolving Patterns, Unchanged Suffering: Rohingya Trafficking Trends](#), published in November 2022, it is worth emphasising that this paper is limited in its thematic and geographic focus, and it does not, as such, provide a comprehensive analysis of human trafficking dynamics throughout Myanmar, or delve into human trafficking dynamics affecting Rohingya populations.

Background

Pre-pandemic Myanmar: a source country for trafficking

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar was a source country for human trafficking for the purposes of forced labour and sexual exploitation.⁸ Statelessness, armed violence, displacement, and poverty were key drivers of human trafficking. In 2019, the vast majority of reported cases of human trafficking involved ethnic women and girls from northern Myanmar who were trafficked to China for forced marriage and forced childbearing.⁹ Myanmar men, women, and children were also trafficked for forced labour in the agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, construction, and domestic service industries in neighbouring countries.¹⁰ Smugglers and human traffickers preyed on vulnerable men and women in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and IDP camps in Rakhine State, subjecting them to physical and sexual abuse, and exploitation.¹¹ A number of illicit gambling facilities were operational before the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the vulnerabilities of women and girls to trafficking and sexual exploitation.¹²

Human trafficking dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar's population became increasingly vulnerable to human trafficking because of the economic slowdown, loss of livelihoods and the dramatic increase in poverty. A survey conducted by LIFT found that nearly three-quarters of low-skilled workers reported a reduction in income during COVID-19, and almost half lost their jobs entirely.¹³ Thousands of migrant workers returned to Myanmar during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the border closures, lockdowns and travel restrictions.¹⁴ This drastically reduced remittance flows to Myanmar,

further stretching the socio-economic resilience of rural households. The pandemic disproportionately impacted women, increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.¹⁵ Despite border closures, local civil society organisations told this analytical unit that they continued receiving reports of ethnic women and girls being trafficked to China and subjected to repeated rapes, forced impregnation, and who were at times sold onwards to other families for forced childbearing after they had given birth.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in human trafficking and labour migration to Myanmar's border areas. An expert interviewed by this analytical unit highlighted the importance of the Chinese government's stringent pandemic response measures, which incentivised its citizens abroad to return to China, depriving criminal networks of the labour required to operate online scam centres in Myanmar and across Southeast Asia. Criminal networks resorted to human trafficking to staff increasingly complex scamming operations. Although the majority of victims were originally trafficked from mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan due to their ability to scam victims in Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, criminal networks also started preying on victims from a wider range of countries – including Myanmar – when they expanded their scamming operations to target a more global demographic.

At the same time, Myanmar men and women increasingly sought out livelihood opportunities in areas controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and Kokang Border Guard Force (BGF), despite accounts of workers being subjected to forced labour, exploitation, and other abuses:

⁸ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." June 2020.

⁹ John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Kachin Women's Association Thailand. "Estimating Trafficking of Myanmar women for Forced Marriage and Childbearing in China". December 2018.

¹⁰ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." June 2020.

¹¹ Community Analysis Support System, Center for Operational Analysis and Research. "Evolving Patterns, Unchanged Suffering: Rohingya Trafficking Trends in 2022.", November 2022.

¹² United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." June 2020.

¹³ Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT). "From the Rice Paddy to the Industrial Park: Working Conditions and Forced Labour in Myanmar's Rapidly Shifting Labour Market." 2021.

¹⁴ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." 2023.

¹⁵ UN Women and UNDP. "Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar." March 2022.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and fighting around Hsipaw, many people are struggling to make ends meet. Some have even had to leave the country and seek work in China or Thailand, while others have turned to scams and illegal activities in places like Laukkaing.

— 38-year-old female, Hsipaw Township

A respondent working as a security guard for a Chinese criminal describes how he sought out opportunities in Laukkaing's illicit economy after he was unable to continue working in mainland China. During the COVID-19 pandemic, strict travel restrictions in Myanmar's border areas exposed Myanmar nationals to potential trafficking due to restrictions of movement, the high cost of travelling to border areas, and the need to use smugglers. This led Myanmar nationals to seek out employers in Laukkaing who could cover the cost of transportation upfront, exposing them to risks of forced labour and abuse:

I used to work in mainland China, but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, they closed down the border and forced workers to return home. I decided to come to Laukkaing to earn money. I have been here almost 2 years now. Because this is a self-administered area, Kokang authorities had orders to shoot anyone who illegally entered Laukkaing when COVID-19 travel restrictions were strict. I travelled with two other friends by motorbike on the Hsipaw- Kunlong - Chinshwehaw road. There were around 10 checkpoints guarded by the Burma army, including people's militia and police. They asked us a lot of cash to cross these checkpoints. The brokers promised to transport us to Laukkaing for 4,000 yuan. We had to ride through the jungle, so the road was quite terrible. But at the last two checkpoints, they did not let us pass at all and asked us to return. So we had to travel back and wait at a hotel full of sex workers for a week. Our cash and all our rations were gone. Luckily, we were able to connect with one boss in Laukkaing, who paid 5,000 yuan per person for us to cross the checkpoints, under the premise that we should say we are new recruits for the people's militia.

- 24-year-old man, Laukkaing Township



Poster raising public awareness of the risks of online scams found in a taxi in Singapore. Image courtesy of CASS.

Current Context

The 2021 military coup led to a dramatic increase in human trafficking, forced criminality, forced labour and sexual exploitation in Myanmar. Although criminal networks existed in Myanmar's border areas before 2021, the decline in the rule of law and the weakening of the state's administrative capacity following the military coup bolstered Myanmar's appeal to criminal networks in Southeast Asia. Criminal networks relocated their operations to Myanmar's border areas following increased raids on scam centres in Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, and Vietnam.¹⁶

Shwe Kokko, an emerging gambling hub on the Thai-Myanmar border that had been under investigation by the Myanmar government in 2020, had a reversal of fortune when the power and internet services were switched back on weeks following the military coup.¹⁷ A civil society respondent attests to the increase in human trafficking and labour migration to Shwe Kokko after the military coup:

Up until the coup, the internet and electricity were turned off. The initial plans to turn Shwe Kokko into a criminal hub had been unsuccessful. We saw a huge difference once the internet and electricity were turned back on following the military coup. We started seeing trafficking to online scamming compounds, but also large numbers of Myanmar young people being recruited to work as doormen, security guards, ushers, cleaners, and waiters...

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

A report by the International Crisis Group found that the curtailing of the Myanmar Armed Forces positioning in Shan State contributed to the expansion of the illicit economy in Myanmar's border areas.¹⁸ A local

respondent stressed there was an increase in abuse and violence in Laukkaing following the military coup:

There are cases when workers do not get any pay, and they try to escape because the working conditions are so bad. Some people cannot pay back their debts so they commit suicide by jumping off buildings, or they are sold to other bosses running scamming operations to pay off their debts by working at IT or hacking. Most of those people are from mainland China. I have heard but cannot confirm that many people have been murdered, especially after the Burma Army took control. Here, human life is not valued.

-24-year-old male, Laukkaing Township

By August 2023, the United Nations estimated that at least 120,000 people across Myanmar may have been held in situations where they are forced to carry out online scams.¹⁹

In recent months, China has exerted increasing pressure on the SAC and armed actors to crack down on online scamming operations. According to the United States Institute of Peace, the Chinese government began ramping up pressure on authorities to crack down on scam centres, focusing on the Wa and Mong La areas in September 2023.²⁰ That month, the UWSA deported more than 1,200 people to China for alleged involvement in online scamming.²¹ When China issued arrest warrants for high-ranking UWSA officials for alleged involvement in online scamming, the UWSA stripped those officials of their party membership, as well as of their military and administrative positions.²² Since then, the UWSA has raided more than 40 scam centres and handed over more than 4,000 people to Chinese authorities, including third-country nationals.²³

¹⁶ International Crisis Group. "Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong." August 2023.

¹⁷ Aug Zaw. "Shwe Kokko: How Myanmar's Crime Hub is Destablizing the Region." The Irrawaddy. February 2023; and Frontier Myanmar. "Scam City: How the coup brought Shwe Kokko back to life." June 2022.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group. "Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong." August 2023.

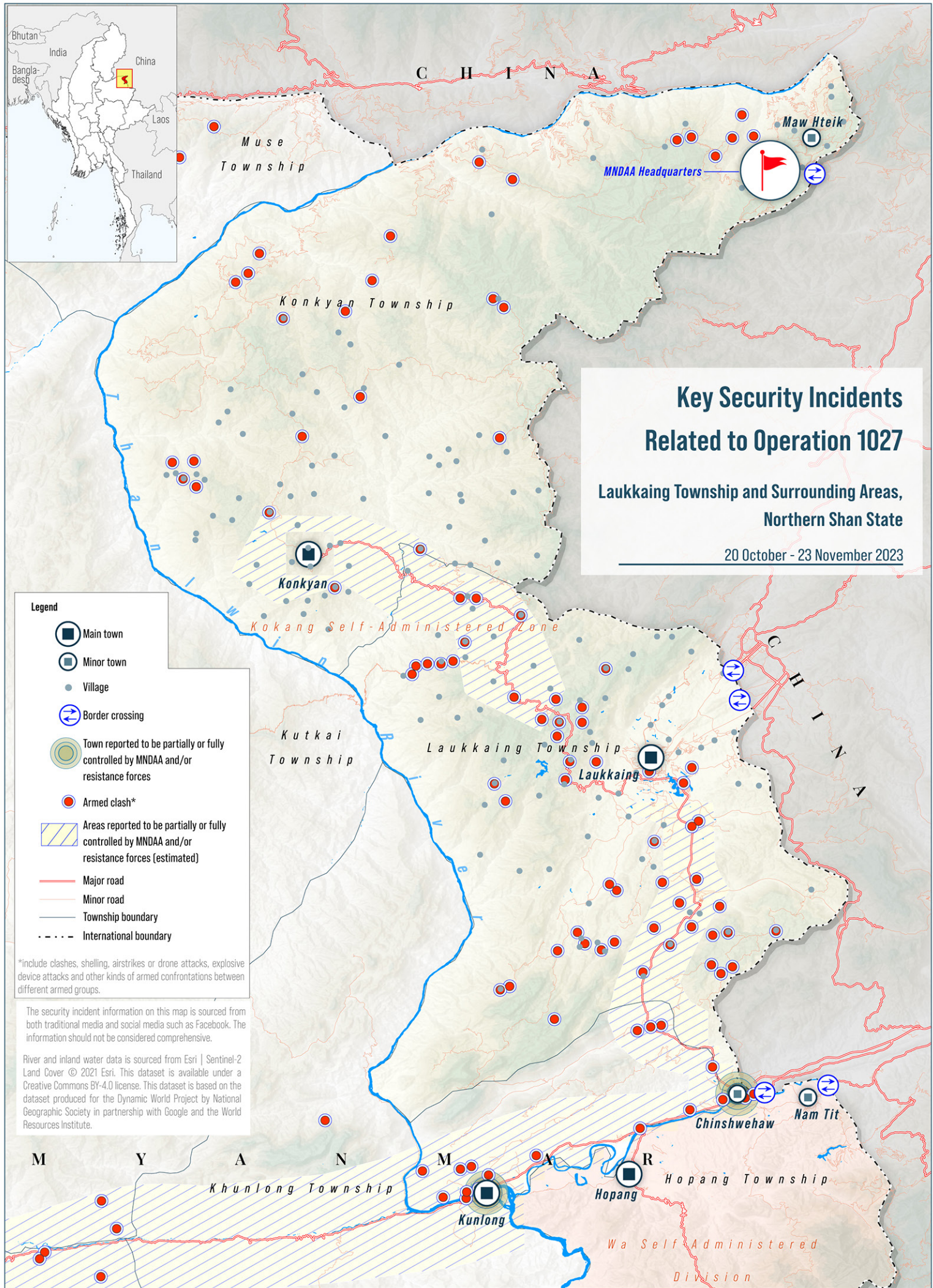
¹⁹ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. "Online Scam Operations and Trafficking into Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia: Recommendations for a Human Rights Response." August 2023.

²⁰ Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower. "Myanmar's Junta Is Losing Control of Its Border with China." United States Institute of Peace. November 2023.

²¹ AP. "Powerful ethnic militia in Myanmar repatriates 1,200 Chinese suspected of involvement in cybercrime." September 2023.

²² Myanmar Now. "China issues reward for capture of cybercrime ringleaders with ties to Wa army." October 2023.

²³ Frontier Myanmar. "Daily Briefing, November 21, 2023: Junta deports 2k Chinese". November 2023.



In comparison, the Kokang BGF did not take decisive actions to crack down on criminal networks involved in online scamming.²⁴ On October 1st, the Chinese government detained 11 influential Kokang leaders, who were in Yunnan attending an exposition and folk festival at the invitation of Chinese officials.²⁵ Analysts emphasise the importance of an incident in which guards killed a number of trafficking victims, including Chinese nationals and Chinese intelligence officers working undercover, attempting to escape from Hiding Tiger Mountain Villa, a notorious scam centre in Laukkaing owned by Ming Xuechang, a former Kokang official and the notorious criminal leader of the Crouching Tiger Villa scam centre.²⁶ This incident resulted in a strongly worded letter from municipal authorities in Yunnan demanding that those responsible for the killings be brought to justice.²⁷

Days later, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, comprising the Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National

Liberation Army (TNLA), launched Operation 1027, targeting a range of strategic positions in Shan State, including the criminal hub of Laukkaing.²⁸ Framed as a crackdown on online scamming, this military offensive prompted the dramatic exodus of criminal leaders from Laukkaing and widespread arrests of those involved in online scamming. This includes Ming Xuecheng, who reportedly killed himself to evade arrest in November 2023.²⁹ Raids on scam centres have reportedly liberated hundreds of people, who are vulnerable and in need of critical support services.

In November 2023, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security reported that a total of 31,000 'suspects' have been transferred from Myanmar to Chinese custody – a number far greater than the cumulative figures reported by the SAC, UWSA, Kokang BGF, and MNDAA, all of whom have handed over hundreds of Chinese nationals allegedly involved in online scamming to Chinese authorities in recent weeks.³⁰

²⁴ Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower, "Myanmar's Junta Is Losing Control of Its Border with China," United States Institute of Peace, November 2023.

²⁵ The Irrawaddy, "China Detains Myanmar Kokang Group Including High-Profile Figures," October 2023.

²⁶ Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower, "Myanmar's Junta Is Losing Control of Its Border with China," United States Institute of Peace, November 2023.

²⁷ Ingyin Naing, "Myanmar Rebel Offensive Helps China's Cybercrime Crackdown," Voice of America, November 2023.

²⁸ Community Analysis Support System, Center for Operational Analysis and Research, "Three Brotherhood Alliance Attacks SAC," October 2023.

²⁹ Ingyin Naing, "Myanmar Rebel Offensive Helps China's Cybercrime Crackdown," Voice of America, November 2023.

³⁰ Xinhua, "31,000 telecom scam suspects handed over to China by Myanmar", November 2023; and Frontier Myanmar, "Daily Briefing, November 21, 2023: Junta deports 2k Chinese", November 2023.

Human trafficking for online scamming

A different victim profile

Interviews conducted by this analytical unit consistently indicate that victims of human trafficking for online scamming have a distinct profile: they are often educated, literate, and savvy with computers. Although both men and women were trafficked, respondents emphasised that victims of human trafficking for online scamming in Myanmar were more often male than female, and typically young. This includes underage children, according to media reports.³¹ According to the United States Institute for Peace, nationals of more than 46 countries

have been trafficked to Myanmar.³² Myanmar nationals have also been trafficked domestically to border areas in Shan State and the Southeast and subjected to forced labour in online scam centres. International organisations working on human trafficking have told this analytical unit that they have much less information about the cases of Myanmar nationals being trafficked for online scamming, due to a potential reluctance to report cases to international organisations.

PROFILES OF MYANMAR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR ONLINE SCAMMING

Young people have become increasingly vulnerable to trafficking in the aftermath of the military coup because of their inability to secure jobs or complete their education. A respondent working for an anti-trafficking civil society organisation emphasised how traffickers are taking advantage of this situation:

Traffickers prey on vulnerabilities. Most of the Myanmar population lost hope in their nation. They feel like they have no future... university students are unable to complete their degrees, and young people don't have access to opportunities. This is their biggest vulnerability - the loss of hope. Traffickers are using this vulnerability, and preying on people by posting job advertisements that make them feel like they're still able to get a good job, use their skills, and earn money in Myanmar. Traffickers have just shifted the demographic that they are targeting: from telling rural families that they can put money on the table by getting their daughter a good job, to targeting an online demographic with a very strong fake human resource department that gets them to believe that job opportunities exist in Myanmar.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

Participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement, human rights defenders, and civil society representatives became increasingly vulnerable to human trafficking in the aftermath of the coup. Interviews conducted by this analytical unit indicated that a number of CDM participants have been trafficked and subjected to forced labour in scam centres, including policemen. A recent report by the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) puts forward the case of a CDM nurse who thought she had received a legitimate job offer in Panghsang but was sexually exploited by the Chinese management running an online scamming business, enduring repeated rapes and beatings each night.³³ According to local media, the family members of SAC administrators, Myanmar Armed Forces soldiers, and policemen >

³¹ Souphatta for Radio Free Asia Lao and Radio Free Asia Burmese Staff. "Trafficked teens tell of torture at scam 'casino' on Myanmar's chaotic border." April 2023.

³² Priscilla A. Clapp and Jason Tower. "A Criminal Cancer Spreads in Southeast Asia." United States Institute of Peace, June 2023.

³³ Shan Human Rights Foundation. "Trapped in Hell: Trafficking, enslavement and torture of youth by Chinese criminal gangs in northeast Shan State since the 2021 coup." October 2023.

have also been victims of human trafficking for online scamming in UWSA- and Kokang BGF-controlled areas, as they attempted to seek job opportunities in border areas or third countries to avoid being targeted by PDFs.³⁴

However, it is important to note that Myanmar nationals involved in online scamming are not always victims of trafficking, and at times are voluntarily engaging in this kind of work. A Radio Free Asia report on an online scam centre operating in downtown Yangon found that Myanmar nationals were reportedly working at the scam centre of their own free will because of difficulties securing a regular income and that they were not subjected to abuse or threat of violence in the scam centre.³⁵ This analytical unit also spoke to respondents who had willingly accepted jobs in scam centres, despite the risks involved, because they felt that they would be able to generate a steady income for a short period and negotiate their release:

“I have not finished my education yet and because of COVID-19 and the current political crises, I cannot continue it. When I look for a job at Laukkaing, the payment is so low yet the requirements are very high, including graduation. And I saw a job advertisement on social media saying we must be good at English and typing. I knew it was a scamming business. But because I needed a job and wanted to gain experience, I joined them. I only worked for 3 months (Dec 2021 – Feb 2022) and came back home. It took the whole day to convince them to allow me to quit. I had one broker help me negotiate. [...] The basic salary is just 3,000 yuan but we get 4% of the amount we scam. And if we can bait one new person, we would receive 500 yuan. I feel immoral because it is a scamming business.”

-22-year-old male, Laukkaing Township

Recruitment Tactics

Scam centres generally lure victims through deceitful job postings shared on social media and recruitment websites. Fraudulent job postings typically advertise positions in customer relations, IT, cryptocurrency, sales, or translation. Respondents told this analytical unit that criminal networks operating scam centres have convincing human resources departments and that victims of human trafficking have undergone multiple rounds of interviews before being offered a fraudulent job to lure them to the scam centre. Women from third countries have also been lured by criminal networks to serve as the ‘face’ of online romance scams, as shown in the job posting below.

Interviews conducted by this analytical unit consistently indicate that fraudulent job advertisements in Myanmar and ethnic languages are rampant on social media platforms, and are not adequately monitored or proactively removed. However, in certain contexts, physical brokers also play an important role in human trafficking for online scamming. A local respondent working in a casino describes how both online job postings and brokers were used to traffic people to Laukkaing:

Here, every tall building is a scamming business. On social media, especially this year, I saw a lot of job advertisements for people who are good at English and IT. Before, English was not an in-demand language here. People from the lower parts of Myanmar are often lured by untrustworthy brokers, and some have been trafficked.

- 23-year-old female, Laukkaing Township

A large number of victims from East Africa had been lured to online scam centres in Myanmar through physical agents:

Although some recruitment was done through Facebook posts, the majority of victims were introduced to physical agents or told of potential opportunities through friends and family... In Kenya, there are numerous private recruitment offices advertising jobs in other countries. Sometimes, these recruiters are not legit and people end up trafficked. It's difficult to distinguish between the two. They can seem very professional, but by the time they are reported to law enforcement, police officers raid the place only to find it vacant, or an entirely new business has set up shop.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

³⁴ Delta News Agency, “Family members of the military and police are also trafficked to hell.” August 2023.

³⁵ Radio Free Asia Burmese, “How a scam ring opened shop in downtown Yangon.” September 2023.

Model

Salary:

Basic salary \$4000 usd, after regular employees \$5000 usd

Job Responsibilities:

1. Have questions and answers / maintain customers warmly and thoughtfully.
2. Responsible for shooting company advertisements and other content when necessary.
3. Answer the customer's video and call to chat with the customer when needed.
4. Improve the adhesion of customers through excellent service.

job requirements:

1. 20-30 years old Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan or other place; Female only
2. Beautiful-looking and fluent in English.
3. can have good communication skills.
4. There is no need to work in the office, and the work is easy.

Fraudulent job advertisement posted online to lure women to scam centres in Myanmar border areas. Screenshot of a vacancy announcement posted by Haotai International Group Vacancy Announcement.

The job postings used to lure victims from Kenya also differ from those typically used to lure victims of trafficking for online scamming:

All of the victims that we supported thought they were bound for jobs in Bangkok. They thought they would be working in Thailand as supermarket attendants, salespeople... They had not applied for typical job postings working in IT or cryptocurrency. –Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

On rare occasions, third-country nationals have also been abducted while on holidays to Thailand.³⁶

Conditions in Scam Centres

Although conditions within scam centres vary, the centres themselves are often large, heavily guarded compounds, particularly in situations where criminal networks are primarily relying on victims of trafficking to operate their online scamming business.³⁷ Men and women living in scam centres report that they are self-contained and that they are often held in cramped quarters, with more than ten people in a room. A local respondent describes the experience of living in a scamming compound in Laukkaing:

They provided a complete package. I just need to pack some clothing. Accommodation, meals, toiletries, and laundry are provided. It was a five-story building and we shared a room with ten people. Some rooms had even more people, living in bunk beds. There were about a thousand people where I stayed. The compound was as wide as three football fields with shopping centres, hotels, and casinos.

-22-year-old male, Laukkaing Township

Respondents shared that working conditions in scam centres were difficult and that they often have to work long hours, between 12 and 16 hours per day. A civil society respondent emphasised that victims of trafficking they supported were forced to work such long hours that they developed painful and swollen legs due to the lack of physical movement. In scam centres targeting a global demographic, those engaging in scamming activities have had to work late night shifts to be online when their targets would be most responsive to messages.

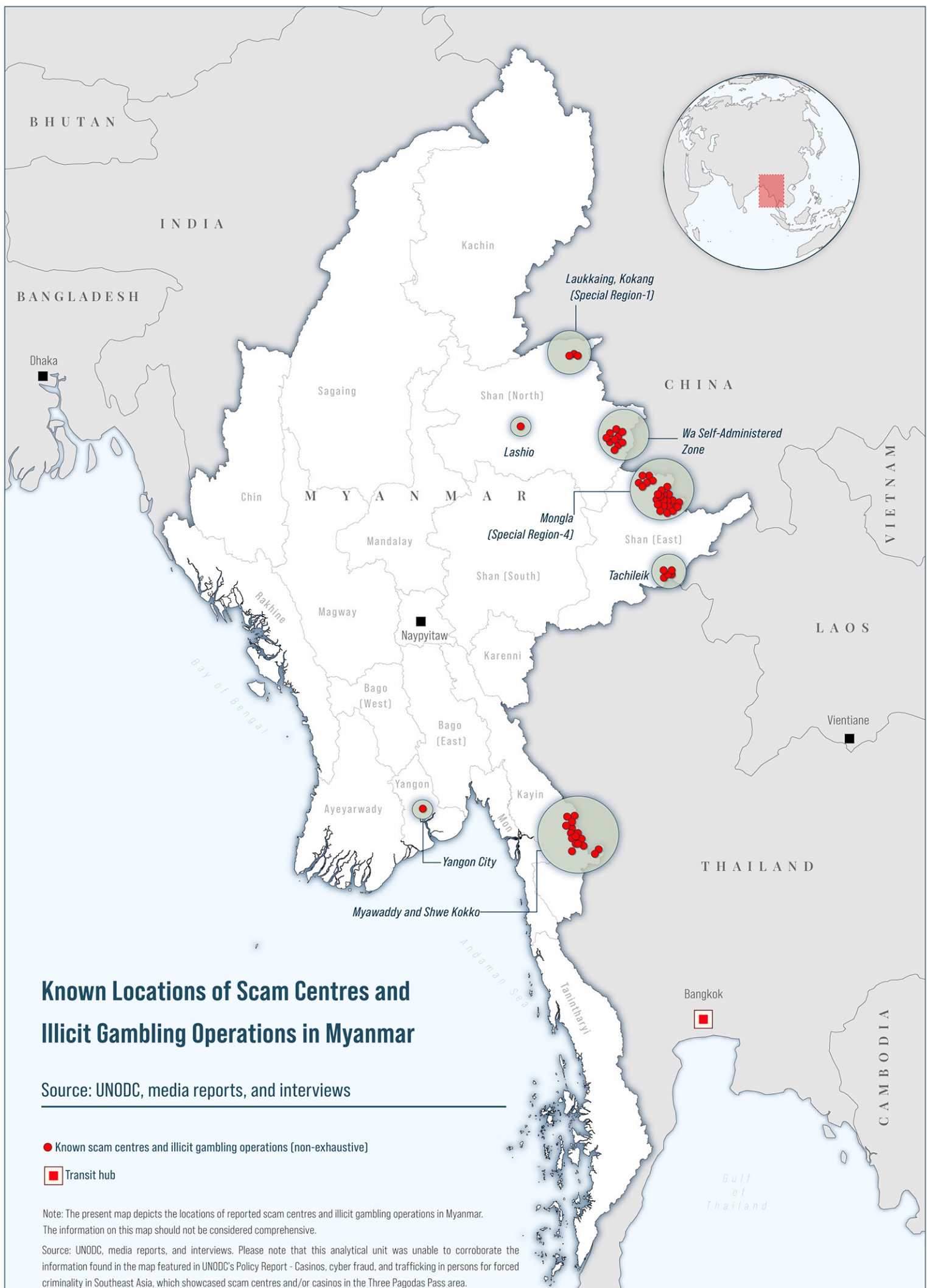
A respondent described the impacts of the long working hours on his health:

I usually started working from 1 PM until 11 PM, and some days I would work until 2 in the morning. It was a very long working day. We did not get to see daylight much, I feel that my health has worsened. I never got a fever at home, but there, I would get ill very easily.

-22-year-old male, Laukkaing Township

³⁶ The Malaysian Reserve. "Kidnapped in Thailand: When 'friends' sell you to human trafficking syndicates." October 2023.

³⁷ International Crisis Group. "Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong." August 2023.





Casinos and scam centres along the Moei River, Thai-Myanmar border. Image courtesy of CASS.

Those held in scam centres are reported to have been subjected to physical violence, torture, and sexual abuse. This includes the use of electric shocks and tasers.³⁸ Rights groups have documented that women held in scam centres were threatened with sexual violence if they did not meet their targets for scamming, and were warned that they could be sold to other criminal networks for sexual exploitation.³⁹ Trafficking victims held in scam centres have also reportedly been threatened with organ harvesting if they failed to meet their targets.⁴⁰ The Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially stated that one of its nationals was subjected to organ harvesting after being trafficked to a scam centre on the Thai-Myanmar border.⁴¹

Due to the violence and abuse, those forced to engage in online scamming are vulnerable to developing complex trauma. A civil society respondent working to support victims describes:

A lot of victims are distressed by having to scam people. They are isolated, far from home, enduring very difficult conditions, and they are building relationships with people online. Then, they are forced to take their life savings. The guilt that they feel afterwards is immense. Those forced to carry out scams have told me that they wish they could contact their victims, reach out to apologise... They are enduring very complex psychological trauma.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

³⁸ Shan Human Rights Foundation. "Trapped in Hell: Trafficking, enslavement and torture of youth by Chinese criminal gangs in northeast Shan State since the 2021 coup." October 2023.

³⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "Casinos, cyber fraud and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia: Policy Brief." August 2023.

⁴⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. "Casinos, cyber fraud and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia: Policy Brief." August 2023.

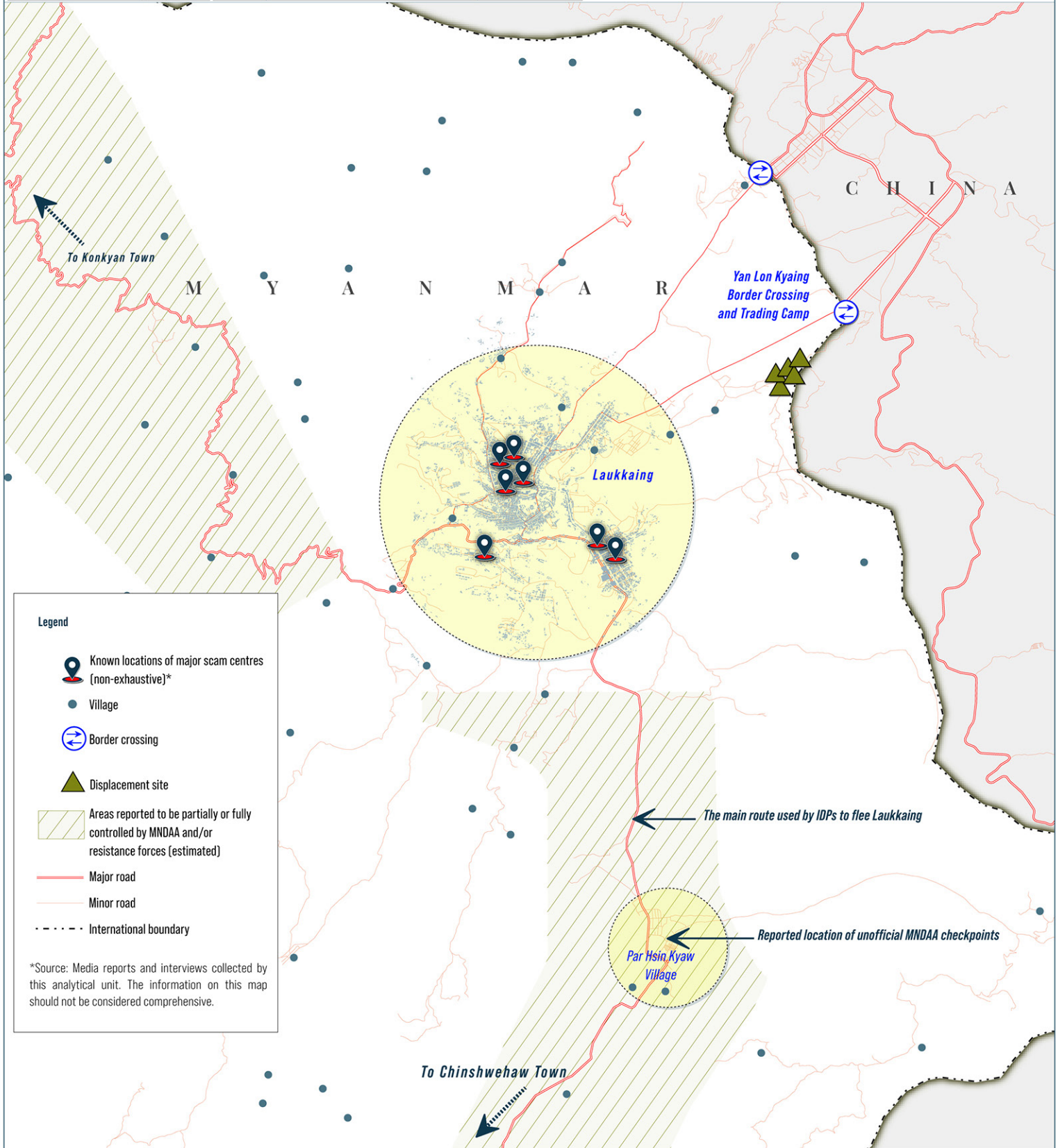
⁴¹ Aggrey Mutambo. "How Myanmar became a destination for trafficked East Africans." The East African. November 2022; Alastair McCready and Allegra Mendelson. "Survivors of Myanmar's Scam Mills Talk 'Torture', Death, Organ Harvesting - and the Battle to Escape." South China Morning Post. July 2023.



Known Locations of Major Scam Centres in Laukkaing

Laukkaing Town,
Northern Shan State, Myanmar

November 2023



Impacts of Operation 1027

The Brotherhood Alliance has reportedly liberated dozens of scam centres in Shan State as part of Operation 1027, which has left trafficking victims in need of critical support services.⁴² Both the SAC and ethnic armed organisations have reported that they have third-country trafficking victims in their custody. An estimated 500 people rescued from online scam centres in northern Shan State are reportedly in custody of the SAC as of mid-November 2023, and being held in military camps, raising protection concerns given the volatility of conflict dynamics in Shan State.⁴³ The MNDAA claims to have about 60 third-country victims of trafficking and

forced criminality in their custody, awaiting repatriation to their countries of origin.⁴⁴ None of these actors have proven particularly experienced or adept at identifying victims of trafficking, providing critical support services or coordinating repatriations, let alone at doing so in a time of crisis. It is crucial to ensure that victims of forced criminality are recognised as such, in line with international conventions, and are not prosecuted for their involvement in unlawful activities. Trafficking victims from Myanmar and third countries are still stuck in Laukkaing, and are extremely vulnerable given the tense conflict dynamics.⁴⁵

⁴² Community Analysis Support System, Center for Operational Analysis and Research. "Three Brotherhood Alliance Attacks SAC.", October 2023.

⁴³ The Irrawaddy. "Myanmar Military 'Holding 500 Foreigners as Human Shields' in War-Torn Shan State." November 2023.

⁴⁴ Myanmar Now. "Anti-regime forces promise freedom for trafficking victims as they move closer to taking Laukkai". November 2023.

⁴⁵ Al Jazeera. "Hundreds of Thais trapped by clashes in northern Myanmar being evacuated." November 2023.

Sexual Exploitation of Women and Girls by Criminal Networks

Sexual exploitation occurs within scamming compounds. A recent report by Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) highlights the case of a Myanmar CDM nurse who endured repeated rapes, including gang rapes, as well as torture after she was trafficked to the Wa State Special Autonomous Region and sold to a criminal network to provide sexual services to Chinese men working as interpreters and technical support staff at a scam centre.⁴⁶ Myanmar women, as well as women from neighbouring countries, have been trafficked and subjected to sexual exploitation in brothels, online pornography businesses and KTV parlours operated by the same criminal networks engaging in online scamming.

A civil society respondent highlighted that women and girls became increasingly vulnerable to sex trafficking following the coup:

The sexual trafficking of women increased after the military coup. So many women and girls from all over the country, from rural areas, from big cities like Yangon or Mandalay were trafficked to Kokang and Wa areas. They thought they would be working in a well-paying, regular job. Some of them did not even know what a KTV parlour was. Instead, they were sexually exploited, and never received any payment.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

SHRF also details the conditions in which a Myanmar girl was trafficked for sexual exploitation to the Wa State Special Autonomous Region by a Chinese criminal network. According to the report, a high school student was trafficked to Mong Pawk, tortured, starved, and detained in solitary confinement until she agreed to pose for nude photos. When she refused to be filmed having sex, the girl was repeatedly raped, tortured and electrocuted by multiple men on film for two months

and shackled to her bed to stop her from escaping.⁴⁷ A local source told this analytical unit that younger women and underage girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation because those operating KTV parlours and other businesses linked with the sexual exploitation of women prefer to staff such facilities with women and girls under the age of twenty.

Women from Southeast Asian countries have also been trafficked to Myanmar's border areas for sexual exploitation. The US State Department estimated that 500 Vietnamese women were sexually exploited in Shan State in 2021 and that Malaysian and Thai women were also trafficked to Myawaddy and the Shwe Kokko border complex for sexual exploitation.⁴⁸ A civil society respondent emphasised that women subjected to sexual exploitation in Shan State have faced increasing abuse and violence since the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many women were enslaved in karaoke bars, or brothels serving largely Chinese customers. Some women were also willingly engaging in commercial sex work, it wasn't always slavery or sexual exploitation. But with lockdowns and the fence that was built on the border between Myanmar and China, the Chinese customers dried up. Many of the women were reportedly moved to new facilities, serving a more domestic audience. It became a much more violent environment. We saw a spike of women contacting us to get rescued in 2021. It's not necessarily that there were more women in brothels, but the conditions were much more violent. Because of the ill-treatment, women were much more likely to take risks to reach out and get help.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

⁴⁶ Shan Human Rights Foundation. "Trapped in Hell: Trafficking, enslavement and torture of youth by Chinese criminal gangs in northeast Shan State since the 2021 coup." October 2023.

⁴⁷ Shan Human Rights Foundation. "Trapped in Hell: Trafficking, enslavement and torture of youth by Chinese criminal gangs in northeast Shan State since the 2021 coup." October 2023.

⁴⁸ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." 2023.

Impacts of Operation 1027

Local respondents reported that many brothels and KTV parlours have remained open in northern Shan State, despite Operation 1027. Women from Myanmar, as well as third countries such as Russia, are reportedly still in Laukkaing. Women and girls who have been trafficked and subjected to sexual exploitation are particularly vulnerable in the current context. Without swift identification and access to critical victim support services, they are at risk of further trafficking and exploitation. Women who were subjected to sexual assault in scam centres, or who were sexually exploited in brothels or KTV parlours, are also at risk of being further abused or traumatised if they do not receive tailored support services, including psychosocial support and access to safe houses while awaiting repatriation or return to their communities.

Statement

October 27, 2023

For nearly a decade, the MNTJP/MNDAA, PSLF/TNLA, and ULA/AA have stood as three closely-knit military and political alliances, fighting with unwavering dedication. Their commitment to the cause transcends the peaceful negotiation table and the unforgiving battlefield, where they have sacrificed life and death in their unyielding pursuit of their shared objectives. Mutual respect and a deep recognition of each other's political objectives form the cornerstone of their alliance. In all circumstances, they stand united, extending their support with the utmost goodwill. Furthermore, a robust policy of "one group's problem is the problem of all three groups" has been firmly established, fostering continued collaboration.

At every critical juncture in Myanmar's political landscape, our three brotherhood alliance has displayed an unyielding commitment, unwavering courage, and steadfast fidelity. This enduring solidarity persists today, and we remain resolute in our determination to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the future. Our distinctiveness from other revolutionary organizations is evident in our approach to the distinct political and military challenges we encounter, which we embrace with unwavering resolve.

In this announcement, we, the united forces of the three brotherhood alliance, declare the commencement of "Operation 1027". Our primary objectives in launching this operation are multi-faceted and driven by the collective desire to safeguard the lives of civilians, assert our right to self-defence, maintain control over our territory, and respond resolutely to ongoing artillery attacks and airstrikes perpetrated by the State Administration Council (SAC). Furthermore, we are dedicated to eradicating the oppressive military dictatorship, a shared aspiration of the entire Myanmar populace. Our commitment extends to combating the widespread online gambling fraud that has plagued Myanmar, particularly along the China-Myanmar border. Additionally, we aim to crack down on online gambling companies and the SAC, along with its associated militia groups, that have been involved in these operations.

Three Brotherhood Alliance



Myanmar National Liberation and Justice Front / Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army



Palaw State Liberation Front / Ta'ang National Liberation Army



United Wa State Army / Arakan Army

DISCLAIMER: The English version is a translation of the original in Burmese for information purposes only. In case of a discrepancy, the Burmese original will prevail.

Three Brotherhood Alliance Statement on Operation 1027.

Myanmar Nationals Risk Abuse When Working in Areas Dominated by Criminal Networks

Particularly as the rule of law has declined in post-coup Myanmar, Myanmar nationals are also at risk of being subjected to sexual violence, abuse, and forced labour when ‘voluntarily’ working in areas dominated by criminal networks. The Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) recently made public the details of a case involving a young woman who had intentionally moved to Laukkaing and worked as an accountant in a casino. Although this woman was not originally trafficked into the casino, SHRF found that she endured sexual violence similar to that inflicted upon the high school student described in the section above. SHRF reported that the accountant was gang-raped by her Chinese boss and his colleagues after being accused of embezzlement, and subsequently committed suicide by jumping off a high-story building.⁴⁹

A respondent working as a croupier at a casino emphasised the risks faced by Myanmar nationals working for criminal networks, which are exacerbated by the lack of oversight by law enforcement or local authorities:

If you steal, of course, they will beat you. Here, the police or authorities are not reliable since this is a black area, controlled by different armed groups. If you do not speak Chinese, or if you used brokers to come here, worse things will likely happen to you.

-24-year-old female, Laukkaing Township

A civil society respondent also told this analytical unit that they have received reports of Myanmar nationals working in casinos having their wages withheld and their movements restricted to the casino compound. Myanmar nationals working in casinos have also reportedly been forced to take drugs to stay alert during night shifts in border areas in Shan State.

Workers in other industries in these areas are also vulnerable to forced labour. A respondent working at a factory making tofu described difficult working conditions and long hours, which prompted him to quit this job after only a week. He only received payment for his work after a fellow worker negotiated on his behalf with their Chinese boss:

I was only able to last a week, and then I came back home. It was so tiring that I could not bear it. I had to start working at 2:30 AM. We would break for breakfast at 8:30 AM, I would try to squeeze in some sleep. Then we resumed work until lunch at 2 PM and worked until 6 PM when we took a break for dinner and then returned to work until 8 PM. Only then did we call it a day.

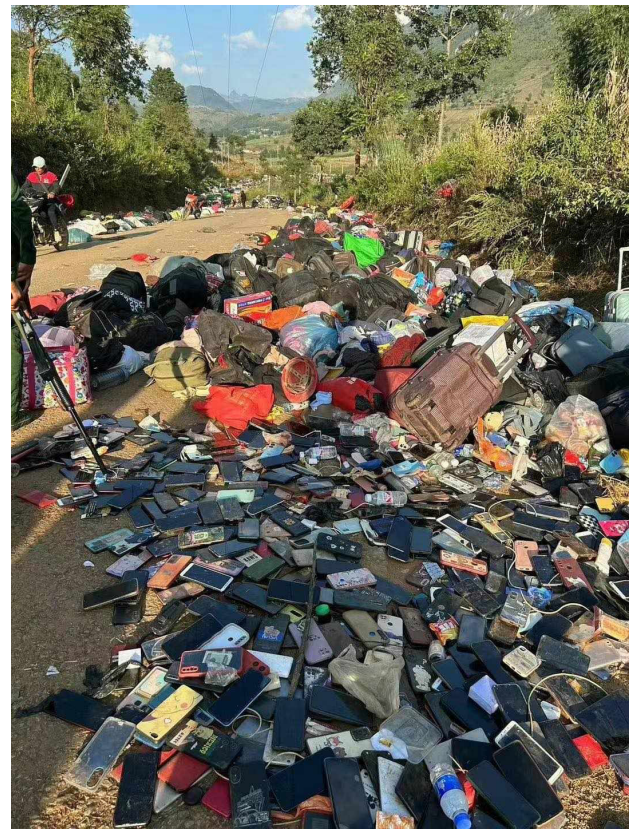
- 41-year-old male, Laukkaing Township

Interviews conducted by this analytical unit indicate that certain demographics are perceived as more vulnerable to forced labour or abuse, such as Myanmar men and women who do not speak Mandarin, or those who come from the Delta or Dry Zone and do not have a local support network:

Laukkaing is a place that does not produce any goods, everyone is making money illegally. It is risky and dangerous, especially if you do not know people. Most of the jobs here involve hacking, scamming, and working in casinos or restaurants. I do see a lot of people, especially from lower parts of Myanmar come to Laukkaing with the hope of making money without connections. Here you cannot expect to just come and search for a job because everything is expensive. A hotel would cost 100,000 Myanmar kyats for a night. So many job seekers end up sleeping in the streets.

-24-year-old male, Laukkaing Township

⁴⁹ Shan Human Rights Foundation. “Trapped in Hell: Trafficking, enslavement and torture of youth by Chinese criminal gangs in northeast Shan State since the 2021 coup.” October 2023.



IDPs stuck on the Laukkaing-Chinshwehaw road. Cell phones litter the side of the road because Kokang authorities have allegedly forced IDPs to leave their personal belongings. Images shared on social media, source withheld for security reasons.

Impacts of Operation 1027

Following Operation 1027, a large number of Myanmar nationals working in Laukkaing have tried to flee due to the escalating violence. Because the road from Laukkaing to Lashio is blocked, civilians are fleeing southwards to Wa State. Posts on social media have claimed that Kokang authorities are forcing some IDPs to abandon their cars and motorbikes, as well as their personal belongings including cell phones, on the way from Laukkaing to Chinshwehaw.

The routes used by IDPs fleeing Laukkaing have also reportedly been affected by shelling.⁵⁰ A respondent told this analytical unit that ethnic minority men have reportedly been forcibly recruited by the MNDAA while fleeing the escalating violence. Local respondents have told this analytical unit that women have disproportionately stayed in Laukkaing, due to fears of shelling, fighting, landmine contamination, and sexual violence during displacement. A particularly vulnerable demographic of women who are left in Laukkaing are female migrant workers, some of whom have been forced to leave the accommodation that had previously been provided by their employers due to Operation 1027.

Because hotel prices have dramatically increased in recent weeks, respondents note that it is more difficult for migrant workers to secure alternative accommodation, and many of them are currently sheltering in local monasteries.

With the Brotherhood Alliance encircling Laukkaing, local community members are worried about the impacts of an escalation in violence. A Myanmar migrant worker currently in Laukkaing has reported that the SAC, Kokang BGF, and criminal networks still in the city are preparing for armed confrontation with the Brotherhood Alliance. There is a high likelihood that civilians will bear the brunt of increased fighting. A local respondent told this analytical unit that only limited food supplies are being allowed into Laukkaing. The price of basic goods has skyrocketed. A kilo of rice has reportedly increased tenfold, from 20 to 200 Chinese renminbi (the equivalent of US \$ 27.50), leading to growing food insecurity. A local respondent told this analytical unit that at least one of the monasteries housing refugees in Laukkaing has run out of rice.

⁵⁰ Shwe Phee Myay News Agency. "Potential casualties due to shelling." November 2023.

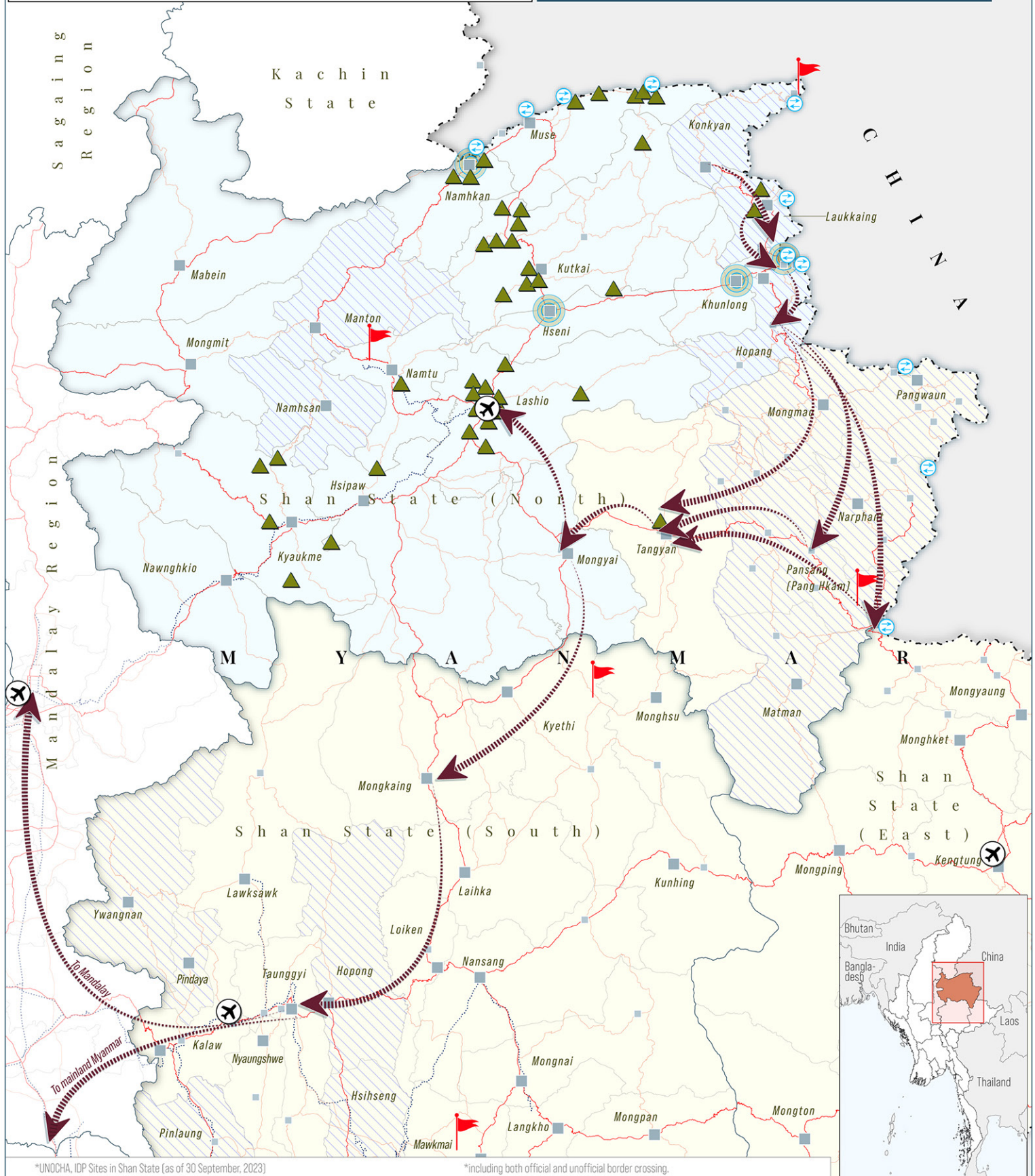
Legend

- Major displacement route fleeing Laukkaing area
- Town reported to be partially or fully controlled by MNDAA and/or resistance forces
- Main town
- Minor town
- Conflict affected township
- Airport
- EAO Headquarters
- Township boundary
- State and region boundary
- International boundary
- IDP camp or displacement site* (before Operation 1027)
- Railway
- Major road
- Minor road
- Border crossing**

Displacement Generated by Operation 1027

Northern Shan State

November 2023



*UNOCHA, IDP Sites in Shan State (as of 30 September, 2023)

**including both official and unofficial border crossing.

Disclaimer: This product is designed for information purposes only. The information on this map should not be considered comprehensive. This map may not show all topographical areas due to scale limitations. Base map data provided by MIMU and copyrighted to MIMU at <http://themimu.info/mimu-terms-conditions>. The accuracy of specific attributes and their geo-locations are manually added and cannot be confirmed.

Forecast

In the short term, the SAC and armed actors will likely continue to detain criminals involved in online scamming and raid scamming centres. Hundreds of vulnerable people will require swift identification, critical support services, and assistance returning to their countries or communities of origin. Because none of these actors are particularly experienced or adept at identifying victims of trafficking, providing critical support services, or coordinating repatriations, victims of forced criminality may not be swiftly identified and even run the risk of being prosecuted for their involvement in unlawful activities. Women or girls who were subjected to sexual violence in scam centres, or who were sexually exploited in brothels, online pornography businesses, or KTV parlours might not be identified as vulnerable victims with specific needs, and run the risk of not receiving tailored support services. Myanmar nationals who were trafficked or subjected to forced labour or abuse, as well as migrant workers, run the risk of being overlooked in this response.

Despite increasing pressure from China and crack-downs on scamming operations linked to Operation 1027, criminal networks will likely try to shift their operations to new areas in Myanmar further away from the reach of law enforcement. Criminal networks have

proven themselves to be resilient to limited interventions in other contexts. There is also a risk that China will alleviate pressure on criminal networks operating scam centres in Myanmar should they take steps to avoid targeting populations in mainland China and limit their use of trafficking victims from mainland China. Should this happen, and criminal networks continue to embed themselves in Myanmar by carving out 'safe spaces' in cities that are more firmly under the control of the SAC, it would be more difficult for law enforcement authorities from neighbouring countries and anti-trafficking organisations to exert pressure to disrupt scamming operations.

Without a more comprehensive, rights-based response, it is likely that victims of trafficking for online scamming, as well as those who were subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation or abuse by criminal networks, will not be swiftly identified by authorities and humanitarian actors, and as such, will be denied the critical support services they need. In a context where armed violence and displacement, food insecurity and poverty are likely to intensify, these particularly vulnerable populations run the risk of being further trafficked, detained, and subjected to abuse and trauma.

Legal Framework

Trafficking in persons is a crime prohibited under international law.⁵¹ The definition of the crime varies slightly depending on whether victims are children or adults. For adults, ‘trafficking’ consists of three constituent parts: an act; a means; and, a purpose. Where victims are under the age of 18, there is no ‘means’ requirement and an act and a purpose alone can establish the trafficking of children.⁵²

For both children and adults, the criminal ‘act’ of trafficking must include the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons.”⁵³ Because scamming compound victims are ‘received’ and ‘harboured’ at scam centres in Myanmar, the ‘act’ component of the crime generally appears fulfilled, regardless of whether victims are brought in from Myanmar or abroad.

To qualify as ‘trafficking’ of children or adults, the ‘purpose’ of this act must be “exploitation.”⁵⁴ Under the law, ‘exploitation’ includes “the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”⁵⁵ — all of which have been reported at scam centres in Myanmar. Consequently, the ‘purpose’ requirement appears to be met frequently in the operations of scamming compounds because individuals tend to be received and harboured for one or more of these enumerated purposes.

Finally, for adult victims, trafficking requires the use of particular means: “the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person.”⁵⁶ Victims brought in from abroad tend to be misled and deceived from their very first contact with scam centre representatives, in addition to later being confined in situations of extreme vulnerability and subjected to threats and other forms of coercion to compel their performance of forced labour in scam

centres. Although some individuals, particularly persons from Myanmar, do enter scamming compounds ‘voluntarily’ — albeit typically from a position of extreme vulnerability as a result of severe hardship and acute unmet livelihood needs — many of these individuals are reported to have faced threats and other forms of coercion, deception, and abuse that afforded scamming compound bosses control over them and compelled them to act as directed upon arrival within these facilities. For these reasons, whether adult victims have been lured in from third countries or Myanmar itself, the ‘means’ element of the crime of trafficking appears to tend to be met in the operation of Myanmar’s scam centres.

Although each component of the crime of trafficking generally appears to be fulfilled by the operators of Myanmar scamming compounds, those rescued from these facilities face a range of challenges in being recognised as victims of human trafficking. Many have been deemed ‘criminals’ due to a lack of understanding or recognition of the forced nature of their criminal conduct. Others are erroneously labelled as immigration offenders or ‘illegal migrants.’ These designations have triggered victim imprisonment, delayed victim returns to countries of origin, and wrongfully compounded trauma and abuse endured by victims in scamming compounds.⁵⁷

In cases where each element of the crime of trafficking is not fulfilled, individuals emerging from scamming compounds and illicit border industries are likely to have endured serious mistreatment, despite not meeting the specific criteria required for designation as victims of trafficking. For this reason, all individuals fleeing or rescued from known criminal industry hubs should be presumed to be survivors of serious human rights abuses, regardless of their trafficking status. All such individuals need access to a full range of support services, including legal counsel to explore avenues to address crimes and misconduct other than trafficking in persons.

⁵¹ For further discussion of the legal definition of the crime of human trafficking, see Community Analysis Support System, Center for Operational Analysis and Research. “*Evolving Patterns, Unchanged Suffering: Rohingya Trafficking Trends in 2022*,” November 2022 at pp. 19–21.

⁵² “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime” [Trafficking Protocol], opened for signature 12 December 2000, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 2237, p. 319, Doc. A/55/383. Articles 3(c) and 3(d).

⁵³ Trafficking Protocol, Article 3.

⁵⁴ Trafficking Protocol, Article 3(a).

⁵⁵ Trafficking Protocol, Article 3(a).

⁵⁶ Trafficking Protocol, Article 3.

⁵⁷ For further discussion, see Humanity Research Consultancy. “HRC Briefing: Guidance on Responding to Victims in Forced Scam Labour”, April 2023.

Response Implications

The collapse of anti-trafficking modus operandi

Prior to the 2021 coup, the United States State Department had already designated Myanmar a Tier Three state — the lowest tier — and included an additional condemnation for Myanmar in its annual Trafficking in Persons report due to state-sponsored trafficking related to the forced recruitment of children into the Myanmar Armed Forces.⁵⁸ Pre-coup, the Myanmar government benefited from considerable support from international organisations to strengthen its ability to prevent cases of human trafficking, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators involved in trafficking. Although some organisations worked to build the capacity of ethnic armed organisations to address human trafficking, the Myanmar government was the main recipient of funding and capacity building.

Respondents from civil society organisations and international organisations told this analytical unit that before the coup, the Myanmar anti-trafficking task force was proactively responding to their requests to support victims of human trafficking. A civil society respondent from Northern Myanmar told this analytical unit that the anti-trafficking task force had strong working relations with civil society organisations and that they proactively supported the rescue of human trafficking victims in China, liaising with relevant authorities and law enforcement bodies to coordinate their return to Myanmar.

Following the military coup, there was a complete breakdown in the administrative capacity of the SAC's ability to prevent, report, or prosecute cases of human trafficking due to the Civil Disobedience Movement, widespread defections, and ongoing armed violence and political crises in Myanmar. The 2023 Trafficking in Persons report found that although the SAC continued to operate nine anti-trafficking hotlines, which received 117 calls in 2022, none of those calls led to the identification

of a victim of trafficking, referral to support services or a criminal investigation.⁵⁹ The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement did not provide direct assistance to any trafficking victims or disburse any funding for victim care in 2022.⁶⁰

Traffickers are taking advantage of the complete collapse of the anti-trafficking institutional capacity to operate with near impunity in Myanmar. Respondents have told this analytical unit that the Myanmar police has no Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in place to address cases of human trafficking of third-country nationals. Because of this, police branches and immigration offices do not share information regarding third-country trafficking victims proactively with each other, or with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A civil society respondent said that it can take up to a month for an embassy to be alerted that one of their citizens has been detained in a Myanmar jail or immigration detention centre. Civil society organisations have been trying to bridge this gap, and inform embassies of potential victims of human trafficking being detained in a Myanmar prison or immigration detention centre. A group of 16 trafficking victims rescued from a scam centre close to Myawaddy were held in Myanmar police custody for close to two months while awaiting repatriation. According to a Laotian anti-trafficking official, this delay was related to their 'illegal entry' into Myanmar, their lack of passports and visas, and the Lao Embassy's inability to provide key identifying details to Myanmar police.⁶¹ This is concerning because of the numerous civil society reports of squalid conditions in detention centres, marked by overcrowding, unsanitary hygiene conditions, inadequate access to food and clean water, lack of access to medical care, and physical violence.⁶² These conditions can cause further traumatising of third-country victims of human trafficking, who have often been directly subjected to or who have witnessed physical abuse, including torture and sexual violence.

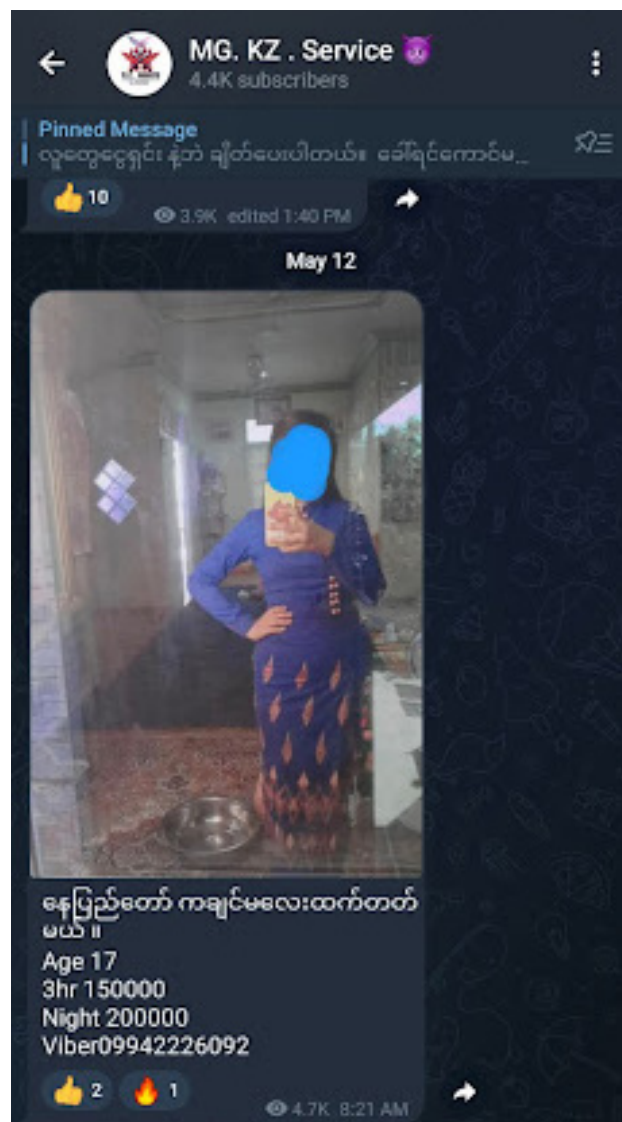
⁵⁸ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." June 2020.

⁵⁹ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." 2023.

⁶⁰ United States Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma." 2023.

⁶¹ Souphatta. "Laotians languish in Myanmar jail after 'rescue' from scam ring." Radio Free Asia Lao. October 2022.

⁶² Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma. "The Flow of Injustice." July 2023.



Screenshots taken by CASS of a Telegram account advertising women and girls for sexual services, including an underage 17-year-old girl. This analytical unit cannot independently confirm whether the women and girls portrayed by this channel are victims of human trafficking.

In contrast, respondents have highlighted that trafficking victims from certain countries with ties to the SAC have benefited from swift rescues and repatriation. Examples provided to this analytical unit include a Russian trafficking victim who was held in a scam centre in Shan State and developed severe post-traumatic stress disorder, who was swiftly rescued after a phone call from the Russian embassy, and Turkish trafficking victims who were rescued from a scam centre in Laukkaing after the Turkish embassy approached the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs earlier this year.

The greater lawlessness and illicit activity across Myanmar since the 2021 military coup have also helped

to remove obstacles to the human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls. The economic crisis has led to a dramatic increase in women engaging in sex work due to acute livelihood needs. A number of civil society respondents told this analytical unit that the SAC is not making credible efforts to investigate or hold to account those responsible for sexual exploitation, increasing the vulnerability of women and girls throughout the country. Online channels advertising sexual services have flourished since the military coup. Telegram groups with thousands of followers have been sharing photographs of women and underage girls and the rates they are charging for sexual services, without being investigated or shut down by the SAC police.

Impacts of the military coup on the anti-trafficking civic space

The military coup drastically affected how civil society organisations are responding to the human trafficking crisis in Myanmar.

Respondents told this analytical unit that INGOs working in the anti-trafficking space downsized their programmes following the military coup. The SAC's brutal crackdown on civil society also impacted the ability of local organisations to continue actively working on human trafficking. Ethnic organisations told this analytical unit that they could only operate in a limited, zero-visibility capacity in SAC-controlled areas because of security risks, including arrests and detention of key staff and SAC raids on their offices.

Many INGOs and local organisations working in the anti-trafficking space adopted a policy of non-engagement with the SAC, which led to a drastic change in how they operate:

Family members have reached out to us to tell us that their daughter went to Kokang or Wa areas and that they lost contact with her. They suspect she was trafficked. Since the military coup, we can no longer work in the same way that we used to under the NLD government. We cut all contact with the authorities. It is difficult for us to do our regular work in this situation, to support survivors of trafficking. We have contact with victims and their families, we still have a safe house that we are running in a low-profile way. We do not let anyone know where it is. We cannot go to Kokang or Wa areas to support a rescue. We know the SAC is looking for us so we keep a low profile.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

Informal responders are uniquely positioned to negotiate the rescues of individuals or small groups of trafficking victims — one of the only hopes for victims of

trafficking for online scamming to get to safety before the recent increase in raids on scamming compounds. When responding to requests to coordinate rescues, informal responders have had to prioritise who they can support and deny help to others because of the difficulties of negotiating for the release of larger groups. Successful rescues have been contingent on the relationship that informal responders have with EAOs and BGFs controlling scamming compound areas, and their ability to identify potential stakeholders for negotiation. Because the rescues are based on patronage ties, they are usually limited in scope:

Since there are more and more requests to release victims of human trafficking, Chinese networks are becoming more and more frustrated. A BGF soldier told me clearly that this was the last rescue he could help to negotiate. I can no longer approach him to ask for support in negotiating the release of other trafficking victims. He said it's hard for him to argue with Chinese networks and he cannot keep doing it. He said it's all about money – releasing people means they are earning less money, so they get frustrated.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

In this context, parahita⁶³ and religiously-affiliated organisations are also crucial sources of support for victims of trafficking from Myanmar, particularly in rural areas, where they serve as the first point of contact for relatives of victims of trafficking. A local source highlighted the case of a woman from Shan State who was able to receive support services when her relatives alerted the parahita group in their village.

Church networks are also playing a vital role in Shan border areas, where there is a scarcity of established civil society organisations in the anti-trafficking space:

⁶³ Parahita, most directly translated to 'altruism', reflects a volunteer mindset for the benefit of others. While the scope of activities vary across religious groups in Myanmar, parahita groups have roughly the same operating models whereby donations are collected from community members of the same religious affiliation to provide goods and/or services to vulnerable groups. They are often part of a devolved structure that link up to a township, state, or sometimes Union-level organisation. For more information, please refer to Center for Operational Analysis and Research. "COVID-19 Response and Parahita Groups." May 2020.

It is very difficult for us to help victims in Kokang and Wa areas. We looked for CSOs there that we could partner with... It is difficult to find an organisation we can work with to effectively support trafficking victims. There are some church networks, however.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

A respondent highlighted the case of a young girl from Muse who had been trafficked to Wa State, after being sold several times. She was able to use GPS on a phone to identify where she was being held and reach out to her friends to ask for support. One of her friends contacted a Catholic church in Kachin State, which was able to coordinate with a local church network to pick her up at a designated landmark after she had escaped through a window.

It is crucial for donors, INGOs, and NGOs operating in this space to engage actively with local civil society organisations, informal responders, parahita groups, and other religiously-affiliated organisations working at the grassroots levels. They can be crucial sources of information on how criminal networks are shifting their operations and the conditions in which trafficking victims are held in scam centres that are still active. Given the rapid rise in the number of trafficking victims liberated from recent raids on scam centres, and the increased vulnerabilities of trafficking victims and migrant workers in Myanmar border areas, they could also aid in the swift identification of trafficking victims and other vulnerable populations, and support the delivery of critical services, contributing to a broader rights-based response.

Challenges faced by civil society organisations

Civil society organisations and local actors face a number of challenges in their work supporting victims of human trafficking.

LACK OF FLEXIBLE FUNDING

One of the key challenges raised by local civil society respondents is the lack of flexible funding available to work on the issue of human trafficking in Myanmar. Both civil society organisations and informal local initiatives are often unable to access institutional funding that has the flexibility needed to support victims of human trafficking. A civil society respondent said:

The grants that we currently hold do not give us the flexibility we need to fund rescues. Instead, we pay for those with individual donations. The rescues we are coordinating are very sensitive, we are unable to release information due to confidentiality issues and are often unable to provide receipts. This makes things a lot more difficult for us.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

An informal responder emphasised that:

We don't have funding available to support victims. We can sometimes help trafficking victims pay for a broker to help them cross the river from Myawaddy to Mae Sot... If trafficking victims are able to cross the border, and they need a hotel or a place to stay before they are picked up by their embassy, we will pay for their accommodation. They also need to eat. Some embassies do not have a budget line to support victims of human trafficking... So we need to help them or find some donations.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

This funding challenge is compounded by the fact that victims of human trafficking or their family members are often asked to cover the cost of their flights or pay a ransom to secure their release. Trafficking victims have also been exploited by drivers when trying to escape. A civil society respondent told this analytical unit that third-country nationals who were victims of human trafficking have been quoted exorbitant prices for transportation – as high as 5,000 US dollars for a driver between Laukkaing and Tachileik before Operation 1027. Informal local initiatives and civil society organisations have played a crucial role in coordinating rescues since they can leverage trusted drivers to ensure that victims do not face further exploitation.

Respondents also recommended that INGOs should play an important role in reducing the fundraising and administrative burden by developing partnerships with grassroots organisations. By leveraging their understanding of donor compliance and reporting requirements, INGOs could shift the burden from local actors, helping them focus on delivering frontline support to victims of human trafficking instead of focusing on administrative issues. Local actors have mentioned that it has been difficult to identify INGOs that could play this role.

THE NEED FOR MORE INCLUSIVE COORDINATION IN THE ANTI-TRAFFICKING SPACE

Informal local initiatives working to rescue and support victims of human trafficking have told this analytical unit that they would benefit from being included in existing coordination mechanisms. A respondent mentioned that they had reached out to the IOM to become involved in meetings on human trafficking in the Mae Sot–Myawaddy border area, but had not received an invitation to join any subsequent coordination meetings.

Civil society organisations working to support victims in their countries of origin also emphasised the need for anti-trafficking organisations working in Myanmar to systematically refer cases to them, to ensure that victims do not fall through the cracks upon their return to their home countries. According to a respondent working for an anti-trafficking organisation in East Africa, an effective transnational case referral mechanism is needed to ensure that victims are referred to support services in their home countries to support their long-term rehabilitation and to reduce the risks of retraumatisation by minimising the need to subject victims to multiple unnecessary assessments by civil society organisations in Southeast Asia and in their home countries.

CHALLENGES WITH VICTIM IDENTIFICATION IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Thailand is one of the major countries of transit for third-country victims being trafficked to Myanmar and is often a transit destination for victims awaiting repatriation. A civil society respondent told this analytical unit that Thai anti-trafficking legislation and processes pose a challenge for third-country nationals rescued from scam centres:

The lack of adequate victim identification process in Thailand has made it really difficult for victims that we are supporting. They want to be recognised as victims of trafficking, but Thai law requires going through a convoluted process to receive victim status in Thailand. The victims just want to go home, they don't want to stay in a third country for such a long time. So they choose to be deported instead.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

The challenges in obtaining victim status in Thailand have resulted in difficulties and logistical constraints for the repatriation of trafficking victims. A civil society respondent cited the example of a large group of victims from East Africa who faced difficulties being repatriated because of their lack of official victim status and the fact that Ethiopian Airlines could only accommodate a maximum of two deportees, which led to a large number of trafficking victims having to wait in Thailand for several weeks for a flight that could accommodate them.

Third-country trafficking victims held in Shan border areas have been subjected to screening by Chinese authorities. A respondent told this analytical unit that Malaysian trafficking victims who were rescued during a raid on a scam centre in Wa State were not adequately identified by Chinese authorities at the border, who did not take steps to contact the Malaysian embassy or attempt to repatriate this vulnerable population. Malaysian trafficking victims were reportedly sent back to Wa State:

It all depends on the country, but there is clearly some racism going on. The Chinese police may not necessarily handle certain nationalities well. If they are not properly taken care of, they run the risk of being trafficked again, and winding up in other scamming compounds.

-Civil society respondent, identifying information withheld.

Both of these countries are playing a key role in processing trafficking victims from third countries that have been released during recent raids on scam centres in Wa, Mong La, and Kokang areas in Shan State. Third-country nationals have been permitted to enter China, where flights have been arranged to transport them from Kunming to Bangkok, where they will reportedly undergo screening to identify whether they were victims of human trafficking and whether they have any criminal records.⁶⁴ Governance personnel in Thailand and China must adopt a rights-based approach to ensure that victims of human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality, and sexual exploitation are swiftly identified and provided with critical support services.

⁶⁴ Reuters. "Hundreds of Thais to be evacuated from Myanmar via China amid heavy fighting." November 2023.

Recommendations

1. **Adopt a comprehensive rights-based approach to the ongoing crisis of human trafficking in Myanmar**, to ensure that victims of human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality and sexual exploitation from Myanmar and third countries are swiftly identified and receive the greatest possible support to ensure the maximum protection of their human rights.
2. **Advocate to governance personnel involved in law enforcement and judicial systems in Thailand, China, and third countries to make coordinated efforts to investigate and hold accountable criminal networks, brokers, and other actors responsible for human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality, and sexual exploitation.** A more coordinated approach is needed since criminal networks have shown great resilience to ad hoc raids, changing their modus operandi and shifting their operations to new locations. Other means of exerting pressure on complicit individuals and organisations, such as the potential use of targeted sanctions, could also be considered. Law enforcement agencies should create pathways for victims to share evidence of criminal activities and human rights abuses, often collected at great personal risk.
3. **Call on authorities in neighbouring countries to take steps to improve the identification, repatriation or return, protection, and rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking, forced criminality, forced labour, and sexual exploitation.**
4. **Support EAOs, the NUG, and other key stakeholders in promoting understanding of human trafficking and strengthening their capacity to identify trafficking victims, deliver critical services, and coordinate with relevant stakeholders to support their repatriation.**
5. **Allocate greater resources to local responders in Myanmar, Thailand, and countries of origin for the provision of crucial support services to victims of human trafficking. Unrestricted and flexible funding is crucial** in helping local actors in Myanmar, neighbouring countries and countries of origin to coordinate rescues, support the safe return of victims to their communities and support services to victims of human trafficking.
6. **Ensure that third-country nationals who have been trafficked to Myanmar have access to diplomatic representatives.** Embassies and consulates based in Myanmar and neighbouring countries should have flexible funding available to support rescues and repatriation. Staff working in embassies and consulates should receive appropriate training in responding to requests for information and assistance from victims of trafficking and should have SOPs in place.
7. **Ensure that the anti-trafficking response is victim-centred and trauma-sensitive.** Given the dearth of mental health professionals in Myanmar, this requires providing substantial funding and technical assistance to meaningfully build the capacity of a range of local responders to deliver Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services to victims of human trafficking, who are at risk of developing complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Key stakeholders, such as governance personnel involved in law enforcement and judicial systems, as well as embassy staff would benefit from capacity development to develop trauma-sensitive approaches and procedures to better support victims of human trafficking, forced labour, forced criminality and sexual exploitation.
8. **Ensure that coordination mechanisms are inclusive of a wide variety of actors involved in the anti-trafficking response in Myanmar.** This includes non-governmental organisations with experience in effectively liaising with SAC administrators, as well as police and immigration personnel on cases related to human trafficking, forced labour, and forced criminality; diverse civil society organisations and community-based organisations working in SAC-controlled, mixed-controlled, and EAO or PDF-controlled areas; ethnic service providers, EAO governance personnel and emerging local governance entities; as well as grassroots informal initiatives to support victims, and religiously-affiliated and parahita groups that are effective in community liaison and often a first point of contact for victims and their family members.

9. **Support the development of a transnational referral mechanism bringing together civil society organisations in Myanmar, neighbouring countries, and countries of origin**, to facilitate their engagement with relevant authorities to ensure that victims are swiftly identified, receive emergency support services in Myanmar and transit countries as they await repatriation, and are referred to competent service providers to receive more long-term medical, psychosocial, and economic rehabilitation upon their return or repatriation.
10. **Expand protection programming throughout Myanmar, neighbouring countries, and countries of origin**. Mainstream screenings for victims of trafficking, forced criminality, forced labour and sexual exploitation during the humanitarian response to Operation 1027 to more swiftly identify vulnerable populations and deliver tailored support services.
11. **Scale up humanitarian and livelihood assistance to support displaced people and local communities throughout Myanmar**, who have become increasingly vulnerable to human trafficking and forced labour.

