

## Outcome Report

### Regional Roundtable on Strengthening Cooperation to Prevent Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology

#### The Roundtable

Transnational organised crime groups are increasingly abusing technology to facilitate a range of crimes including, concerningly, trafficking in persons (TIP). Leveraging encrypted communication applications, a wide range of social media platforms and dating websites, money laundering through cryptocurrencies, and, increasingly, making use of artificial intelligence (AI), transnational organised crime groups are not only perpetrating crimes more efficiently, but they are also using technology to facilitate new forms of criminality.

Foremost among these concerning trends is the emergence of large-scale online scam centres whose operations are largely facilitated by victims of trafficking being forced to perpetrate illegal scamming operations. What initially was centred in the Mekong Subregion, has today spread to many parts of Southeast Asia and, increasingly, throughout the world. This once-regional issue has become a global challenge. As trafficking victims originate from across the globe, scams are targeting victims around the world, and the geographical presence of scam centres continues to broaden. It is clear no region can support solutions alone and that global efforts are needed that incorporate governments, law enforcement, and the private sector in developing strategies to counter online scam centres, and in parallel, the abuse of technology to perpetuate trafficking in persons.

To address the emerging challenge of trafficking in persons caused by the abuse of technology—particularly related to the challenges posed to the ASEAN Region by online scam centres and related transnational organised crime—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (KEMLU), the Bali Process Regional Support Office (RSO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) jointly hosted the Regional Roundtable on Strengthening Cooperation to Prevent Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology (the Roundtable) on 29 August 2023 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Roundtable was organised in line with the Co-Chair’s Statement and 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation agreed to at the 8th Bali Process Ministerial Conference, in addition to Indonesia’s priority deliverable under the current chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and ASEAN’s stated objective to address challenges stemming from the abuse of technology, as expressed in the May 2023 ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology. The Roundtable brought together relevant stakeholders from ASEAN Member States, as well as government partners from beyond the ASEAN Region with a shared interest in responding. The Roundtable worked to foster collaboration between those responding and to develop actionable ideas for responding to this challenging situation.

The Roundtable, which included 65 participants representing 14 countries, was successful in furthering discussion about collaborative responses to the situation. Opening remarks for the event were provided by H.E. Andy Rachmianto, Director General for Protocol and Consular Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia; Mr David Scott, Co-Manager, Regional Support Office of the Bali Process; and Mr Jeff Labovitz, IOM Indonesia Chief of Mission, each of whom noted the growing human toll online scam centres are having within Southeast Asia, while also noting the importance of slowing and reversing their spread into new regions. The importance of responding rapidly in a coordinated manner was emphasised by each, as was the fact prevention needs to be central to the response—with awareness-raising efforts needed with specific messaging targeting those who may be vulnerable to trafficking into the scam centres, law enforcement and immigration officials, as well as those potentially vulnerable to being scammed.

Prevention strategies, good practices, and collaboration opportunities were further discussed during presentations from Australia, China, Kenya and the United States. The event also featured discussions of the role of the private sector in preventing technology-facilitated trafficking, with representatives from SEEK and Meta discussing how their organisations are working to counter TiP, online scams and, in particular, fraudulent job postings. A session on the role of media and journalists in raising awareness around the online scams issue featured the Straits Times and Kompas Media, with their presentations emphasising that the media can be an effective partner in awareness raising, particularly when information is communicated to them by governments in a timely and proactive manner.

Throughout the Roundtable, speakers highlighted how the online scam centre issue has spread beyond the Mekong Subregion and is now increasingly a regional and global challenge. To address this, the need for stronger collaboration between governments, law enforcement, the private sector, civil society, and media was highlighted the need to coordinate responses and work across sectors to share information, evidence, and best practices. The massive scale and complexity of the online scam centre issue, as well as the cross-sectoral and cross-regional nature of the challenge it presents, makes clear that no single government or organisation can solve this issue independently. An *all hands on deck* response is needed, taking advantage of, to the extent feasible, existing cooperation mechanisms and frameworks, to support the implementation of a rapid and well-coordinated response effort.

## Key Themes and Proposed Responses

### **Theme 1. Collaboration for the Protection of Victims**

Proposed responses discussed during the Roundtable included that:

- Screening and identification processes for trafficking victims in online scam centres need to be strengthened, including through the delivery of capacity building support and developing standard operating procedures for consular officers, as well as border officers and other relevant law enforcement, especially in cases of forced criminality.
- Efforts to ensure adherence to the non-punishment principle should be strengthened, emphasising that visa overstay fees should be waived in all cases related to trafficking in persons and forced criminality.

- Return and reintegration processes for victims should be promoted, including through bilateral coordination efforts. Professional assessments should be fostered across borders to effectively evaluate protection needs of victims.
- Efforts to coordinate with and support civil society organisations (CSOs) working with victims of trafficking should be redoubled, including increasing communication with CSOs to share information on victim profiles and, more broadly, to collaboratively identify and support potential victims of trafficking.
- Comprehensive rehabilitation programs, with a focus on developing a growth mindset and introducing pathways to employment within the licit economy, should be established to aid victims in their rehabilitation and reintegration and to support prevention through reducing the risk of re-migration towards online scam compounds.
- Processes for victims to report incidents to both source and destination countries should be clarified and law enforcement should be given training and resources to ensure they have the capability to respond to these reports.

## **Theme 2. Building Awareness of New Victim Profiles, Modus Operandi, and Trafficking Risks on at-risk Populations**

Proposed responses discussed during the Roundtable included that:

- Awareness-raising materials should be developed, translated into relevant languages, and widely shared amongst law enforcement, border officials, consular staff and civil society to increase knowledge of shifting victim profiles and to support effective screening and identification practices.
- More structured guidelines, ideally developed into a deployable toolkit as well as a more concise, sharable set of guidelines, are needed to update, advise and, in some situations, train consular staff and immigration officers in how to screen potential victims of trafficking, as well as how to respond when victims are identified.
- Collaboration with the private sector and media outlets should be prioritised and should support efforts to raise awareness of human trafficking risks into online scam centres and promote safe migration pathways on relevant social media and job search platforms.
- Regular multi-stakeholder forums for international counterparts to coordinate should continue to be initiated through the Bali Process and the Regional Support Office (RSO).
- Clear pathways should be established for communication between the private sector, governments, and law enforcement, ideally through a structured focal point network.
- Research and data collection initiatives need to be scaled up to accurately and comprehensively identify shifting trends in the scale, location, and victim profiles of online scam centres, as well as related illicit financial flows.

### Theme 3. Engagement to Strengthen Law Enforcement Cooperation

Proposed responses discussed during the Roundtable included that:

- Capacity should be strengthened for law enforcement to identify and trace illicit financial flows in and out of scam centres, preventing their proceeds from funding scam centre expansion or other related illicit activities.
- Regional border management measures should be strengthened through increasing border officers' capacity to identify fraudulent visas and conduct in-depth interviews—including questions to screen for victims of trafficking of forced criminality—to ensure secure migration flows.
- There should be greater emphasis on reducing corruption at border crossings—and in border regions more widely—to increase the difficulty for transnational organised crime groups to traffic victims across borders and into online scam centres.
- More intensive anti-corruption strategies specific to countering trafficking in persons should be developed and implemented, including efforts to expand the availability of anti-corruption tools and resources to counter-trafficking practitioners and to encourage the allocation of additional financial resources to support anti-corruption efforts.
- Efforts should continue to ensure that law enforcement can use available tools to request and obtain electronic evidence in a timely manner, working to engage the private sector in these efforts so that their existing law enforcement portals or engagement tools can be more regularly utilised.
- There is a need to develop cross-border early detection mechanisms through proactive and preventative online monitoring, while establishing and strengthening bilateral and regional collaboration for mutual legal assistance and joint investigations.
- There needs to be an increase in online investigative capacity amongst law enforcement agencies addressing TiP, with a particular emphasis on preventative strategies and early detection of new trafficking trends.

### Next Steps

Building from the priorities put forward during the Roundtable, KEMLU, the RSO and IOM, in coordination with the range of partners who participated in the Roundtable, will work to implement tangible and timely response activities in line with the themes and potential responses noted above. Specifically, KEMLU, the RSO and IOM will work to prioritise the following:

- Continued meetings and dialogues, with an emphasis on improving information sharing and response coordination between all actors, including:
  - Regional dialogues on protection, prosecution and partnerships will be organised, providing space to supplement the prevention-focused discussions of this Roundtable.

- The RSO, KEMLU, and IOM will host meetings and group discussions to operationalize the proposed response strategies found within this Outcome Report.
  - Dialogues will be initiated with the private sector, working to improve job post moderation, prevent criminal activity online, and streamline information sharing, including evidence related to TiP investigations. These dialogues will focus on coordination and collaboration, with an emphasis on implementing proposed prevention strategies as laid out in this Outcome Report.
  - The RSO will host the Regional Dialogue on Online Scam Centre Coordination (ROSCC) in early 2024, providing a platform for actors to discuss and coordinate response activities, potential collaborations, and shape work plans going into 2024.
- Specific focus will be placed on operationalising recommendations/activities proposed within the:
- ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking-in-Persons 2023-2028 (Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0); and the
  - May 2023 ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology.