Cambodia's crackdown on online scams shows that nobody is above the law

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FILE - Bun Sosekha, Deputy Commissioner in charge of Security Unit, Phnom Penh Municipal Police, gives a tour of a scam center to journalists in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Wednesday, March 11, 2026. (AP Photo/Heng Sinith, file)

Online scams are among the most serious transnational crimes threatening global security. They defraud victims around the world and move illicit funds across borders, undermining trust in online commerce and finance. In Southeast Asia, criminal networks also prey on people seeking work, trapping them in scam operations.

Cambodia is tackling this problem head-on. Cambodia is also a victim of these networks. They have damaged our reputation and exploited vulnerable people on our territory. Scam networks have taken advantage of Cambodia's openness and the ease of movement across the region. Under Prime Minister Hun Manet's leadership, the government has made the fight against online scams a national priority. The legal framework is stronger. Law enforcement has expanded, and cooperation with international partners has increased.

Scams are operated by sophisticated cross-border enterprises that recruit across jurisdictions and adapt quickly. Many people working in scam compounds are themselves victims. They are lured by false job offers and trafficked to Cambodia. Once there, they are stripped of their passports and identity documents and forced to commit fraud under threat of violence.

Cambodia understands that outside observers want tangible results, not promises. The real test of this crackdown is on the ground: Are sites shut down and kept closed? Are victims protected? Are those behind these networks brought to justice?

Cambodia has made measurable progress. From July 2025 to May 2026, police investigated more than 400 cases in Phnom Penh and across the provinces. Twenty-five casino locations had their licenses revoked or suspended because of links to online scams and were then shut down. A total of 143 cases were formally filed, involving 1,458 suspects from 19 nationalities. Between January 2025 and May 2026, nearly 19,000 foreign nationals linked to online scam operations were deported, representing 33 nationalities.

Cambodia's Law on Anti-Technology Fraud, enacted on April 6, is the country's first law written specifically to tackle the scam industry. It gives prosecutors and law enforcement stronger powers to go after those who organize, finance and run scam operations, as well as the infrastructure behind them. It also recognizes that some people caught up in these schemes are victims of coercion and trafficking and should receive protection and safe repatriation.

The new law is working. It is dismantling the systems that support scams, not just punishing individual offenders. Responsibility extends to property owners who knowingly facilitate such operations and to others who provide essential support. The aim is to stop criminal sites from reopening under different names or quietly shifting into front businesses.

Cambodia is also widening the crackdown. Police are seizing equipment and financial evidence. They are targeting those who facilitate illegal crossings or protect these networks. Recent high-profile arrests of a lieutenant general in Cambodia's immigration service and a major general in the Phnom Penh police on allegations linked to scam-related bribery show that this campaign is not limited to low-level operatives. Nobody is above the law.

Cambodia is not hiding from scrutiny. I have led international journalists to former scam sites and spoken openly about the problem and what we are doing to address it. Cambodia is also working more closely with foreign embassies and international NGOs to improve victim protection and repatriation.

No country can dismantle transnational criminal networks alone. Cambodia needs stronger international law-enforcement cooperation to reach the masterminds and financial networks behind these crimes, many of which lie beyond our borders. That is why we are working closely with the U.S., China, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN partners, the European Union, and agencies such as the FBI. This cooperation includes investigations, deportations, intelligence-sharing, and efforts to disrupt cross-border financial flows.

Our efforts are also about protecting the future that Cambodia is working to build. Prime Minister Hun Manet has emphasized the need to eliminate the black economy, which harms our reputation and undermines business confidence. Cambodia is building infrastructure and expanding trade. It is attracting investment and developing human capital. Protecting that progress means strengthening an economy based on the rule of law, openness and trust.

Some international observers remain skeptical of our efforts. That is understandable. The real test is whether criminals are brought to justice and victims are properly identified. Cambodia knows it must show sustained action and measurable results.

Criminal syndicates adapt quickly, and we are not claiming victory. But Cambodia has moved from periodic crackdowns to a sustained campaign to eliminate these networks. The legal framework is stronger. Enforcement has expanded. International cooperation has increased, and institutions are being built to sustain this effort.

Cambodia will not be defined by criminal networks, but by our determination to eliminate them. We have made real progress, and we know there is more work ahead. But the direction is clear. Cambodia is committed to finishing this fight.

Chhay Sinarith is Head of Cambodia's Commission for Combating Online Scams and serves as Senior Minister in Charge of Special Missions. He is leading Cambodia's nationwide campaign to dismantle online scam networks and implement the country's new law on anti-technology fraud.

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