

## From The Editor

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# The borders are ill-defined and the center is hazy

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The World Health Organization reclassifies cholera as a new major health emergency with intention to raise awareness and encourage global action due to rising cholera cases in various countries including Myanmar which subsequently crossed the border to Thailand. After the outbreak in Shwe Kokko, the city in Myanmar at the border, two cases were diagnosed in the near-by Mae Sot district, Tak Province in Thailand on 22 December 2024. The border was closed and cholera red zones were declared in four districts while surveillance and other proper measures were operated. A Thai health team was sent to Shwe Kokko on December 31, 2024, to assist

in controlling the outbreak, delivering additional oral rehydration solutions and medicines to support Myanmar's healthcare workers in treating cholera. From the start of December last year until January 1, Shwe Kokko had 761 cases requiring hospitalization, Tak had 4 symptomatic and 3 asymptomatic cases. Up until the present, there has been no new case in Thailand [1].

New Year in Thailand started with two high-profile persons from China, one of whom was an actor and the other was a model, gone missing at the Thailand-Myanmar border with very similar circumstances. They received a WeChat message, confirming their selection for a film audition. They arranged their own trip to Thailand, made a last contact at the border expressing sadness, and lost contact. Family members reported the cases to the Chinese police and Chinese embassies in

both Thailand and Myanmar. They urged influential bloggers and media in China to spotlight the case to attract public attention in hopes of a swift resolution. Subsequently, Thailand and China planned to create a coordinated center dedicated to tracking missing individuals duped into travelling to neighboring countries. The center will enhance the exchange of vital information, targeting gangs operational in Thailand and abroad. This collaboration signifies joint determination to diminish the allure of Thailand as a transit hub for illegal activities, including call centre scams, human trafficking, and other transnational crimes while bolstering security measures at the borders. Through these efforts, Thailand and China aimed to create a safer environment for both residents and visitors alike, marking a significant stride forward in the fight against transnational crime [2].

The scenes of operation, the details of how the scams were operated, and the route of money transfer were revealed more clearly to the public when the Thai-British beauty queen lost 4 million Baht to a Cambodia-based scam gang. A woman suspect was approached to open a mule bank account and brought illegally into Cambodia to a building where a Chinese-led scam gang operated. In the building were 20 Thai people and mock offices of bogus Thai authorities who were actually scammers. The suspect had her face scanned in the process of opening the account and was paid 3,500 baht [3].

According to the Anti Online Scam Operation Center (AOC), the Thailand's 1441 Hotline one-stop service established in 2023 to combat cybercrimes by controlling the damages and simplifying the process to protect financial assets of victims, there were 1, 176, 512 reports from 1 November 2023 to October 2024, with 348, 600 accounts frozen and 19, 000 million Baht lost [4].



Above: A warning sign of being deceived into engaging in cybercrime at Thai-Myanmar border (picture credit: <https://www.nationtv.tv/news/crime/378954530>), Below: One of the typical compounds believed to host transnational crime adjacent to Thai borders at night time (picture credit: <https://www.thailand-business-news.com/asean/myanmar/193222-thailand-halts-power-supply-to-myanmar->).

However, what was reported in Thai media seemed to be the tip of the iceberg. A Chinese newspaper estimated that the criminal scammer centers in Myanmar operated by Chinese investors could be more than 1,000 and the victims of their operations could be more than 100,000 persons a day [5]. In 2023, Thai government rescued around 900 Chinese citizens from trafficking and Myanmar government extradited more than 31,000 Chinese citizens suspected to be involved with cybercrimes to China.

The transnational crimes at the borders raised the debates on the government's potential opening of entertainment complexes and casinos, a move intended to boost tourism and generate significant revenue, that these establishments could act as conduits for laundering money. The absence of rigorous regulations and monitoring processes could inadvertently transform Thailand's casinos into attractive destinations for shady operators looking to 'clean' their money. If casinos are to open their doors, they should do so under strict scrutiny, with policies that include comprehensive background checks, financial monitoring, and collaboration with international agencies to track any suspicious capital flow [6]. This controversial decision of Thailand's government also sparks concerns over potential societal impacts such as erosion of traditional values, moral decay and negative influence on the youth's mindset. Lately, a telephone-based comprehensive survey conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), carried out over January 20-21, 2023, captured the views of 1,310 adults from diverse educational, income, and occupational backgrounds nationwide revealed a decided public disapproval of the Thai government's plans to establish a casino-entertainment complex and legalize online gambling [7].

Even though the border between southern Thailand and Malaysia is better defined, the Malaysian government would like to make it best to enhance security by building a 100-kilometer border wall to prevent illegally crossing the border [8]. Still, there is an issue related to folk. Many residents disagreed with the authorities' decision, saying the people on both sides of the border were like "brothers and sisters", and cross-border movements became a way of life for the community. It is estimated that nearly 500 children consisting of both Malaysian and Thai citizens cross the border daily from Thailand to attend school in Malaysia, according to local media reports. Residents on both sides of the border hope that the governments

of Malaysia and Thailand will make it easier for them, and their children, to continue their living without interruption.

Transnational crimes across Thailand borders, Myanmar crisis and China's assertiveness in the South China Sea are urgent ASEAN issues awaiting regional solutions [9]. Another escalating cross-border issue affecting multiple nations and requiring ASEAN-wide cooperation is the worsening pollution crisis, characterized by hazardous PM2.5 levels. Bangkok and surrounding areas struggle with high PM2.5 levels, reaching up to  $111 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  [10], more than 7 times surpassing the WHO safety threshold [11] in some areas. A significant contributor to PM2.5 pollution is agricultural burning in Thailand and its neighboring countries. Thai authorities have already initiated preventive measures, including penalties for agricultural burning, since November last year. However, the scale of the problem necessitates broader regional collaboration.



*The hazy Bangkok on February 4, 2025 with the average PM2.5 of  $61.5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ .*

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