



Hundreds of foreigners freed from Myanmar's scam centres



More than 250 people from 20 nationalities who had been working in telecom fraud centres in Myanmar's Karen State have been released by an ethnic armed group and brought to Thailand.

The workers, more than half of whom were from African or Asian nations, were received by the Thai army, and are being assessed to find out if they were victims of human trafficking. Last week Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra met Chinese leader Xi Jinping and promised to shut down the scam centres which have proliferated along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Her government has stopped access to power and fuel from the Thai side of the border, and toughened up banking and visa rules to try to prevent scam operators from using Thailand as a transit country for moving workers and cash. Some opposition MPs in Thailand have been pushing for this kind of action for the past two years. Foreign workers are typically lured to these scam centres by offers of good salaries, or in some cases tricked into thinking they will be doing different work in Thailand, not Myanmar.

The scammers look for workers with skills in the languages of those who are targeted for cyber-fraud, usually English and Chinese.

They are pressed into conducting online criminal activity, ranging from love scams known as "pig butchering" and crypto fraud, to money laundering and illegal gambling.

Some are willing to do the work, but others are forced to stay, with release only possible if their families pay large ransoms. Some of those who have escaped have described being tortured.