

New crime-fighting network to help ASEAN tackle cross-border cases

Japan and UN back effort to combat traffickers and cyberthieves in time of COVID



A police officer arranges seized drugs in Bangkok in 2018: The region's governments hope better communication will help tackle cross-border crimes including smuggling. © Reuters

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KYOTO -- Ten Southeast Asian countries have established a new framework to fight cross-border criminal activity, from human trafficking to cybercrime, amid fears that COVID-19 has created more fertile ground for lawbreakers.

The new South East Asia Justice Network (SEAJust) includes prosecutors, national police and other law enforcement authorities from nine members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations -- except Indonesia -- and East Timor. Together, with help from Japan and the United Nations, they aim to lower the hurdles for pursuing justice.

Human trafficking, drug smuggling, illegal wildlife trading, money laundering and cybercrime are all rampant in Southeast Asia. Judicial procedures on such transnational crimes require

collecting evidence in multiple countries. But doing so only through traditional diplomatic channels is not easy: Differences in language, legal systems and practices can clog up the process and leave many requests for documentation unanswered for a long time.

SEAJust, revealed on Tuesday at the 14th U.N. Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Kyoto, is designed to change that.

Each member selects two officials from participating authorities and ensures they remain in close contact with their counterparts.

"I can build trust with my colleagues from Myanmar, Vietnam" through this network, said Jumpon Phansumrit, director general of the international affairs department in the Thai attorney general's office, who took part in the Kyoto congress remotely. "I can contact [a Vietnamese colleague] to speed up requests, I can call from Messenger, WhatsApp on weekends."

Indonesia, which has not joined the network due to domestic delays, is expected to get on board. Indonesian officials did attend the meetings as observers. Standing behind SEAJust are Japan, which is providing 100 million yen (\$920,000) in funding, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which serves as a coordinator.

A pressing concern is the impact of the pandemic, which does not appear to have slowed criminals down and may even be creating new opportunities for illegal enterprises.

Jeremy Douglas, UNODC's regional representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, warned last year: "Major transnational organized crime groups in the region have been largely resilient to COVID-19 -- they do not follow the rules countries have to follow, and in some respects the pandemic has been an advantage for them."

From May to September 2020, the customs authorities of 15 countries and territories -- including seven ASEAN states, China, India and Australia -- conducted an operation to disrupt the trafficking of drugs and wildlife products. The Mekong region was the main target. The operation exposed 284 cases of trafficking while confiscating 1,983 kg of illicit drugs, 108 tons of precursor chemicals that can be used to make drugs, 1,892 kg of endangered wildlife products, 82 live wild animals and 145 tons of timber from protected forests.

In other words, the spread of the coronavirus was doing little to stem crime.



A zoo worker injects a tiger with a tranquilizer to collect data as part of an effort to curb the illegal wildlife trade in Thailand's Chonburi Province in 2016. © Reuters

Meanwhile, with internet transactions increasing alongside the growth of telework, the risk of online cross-border crime is also drawing attention.

One particular worry is the use of the "dark web" -- corners of the internet that cannot be found through regular search engines like Google. Accessed through a special browser called Tor, the dark web's "onion services" offer anonymity and privacy but can also be misused for trafficking personal information. Data leaked via viruses, for example, can be sold through the dark web.

The number of onion services swelled from several hundred in 2012 to over 100,000 in 2020, according to a U.N. report titled "Darknet Cybercrime Threats to Southeast Asia."

"The use of darknets and the dark web has increased in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic also appears to have further exacerbated the trend, including by criminals with no prior cyber experience," Neil Walsh, chief of the UNODC's Cybercrime and Anti-Money Laundering Section, warned in a press release for the report.

For authorities, COVID-19 creates additional impediments to cooperation. Countries are unable to hold face-to-face conferences as often as they did before the pandemic. At a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in September 2020, the participants stated, "We also recognized that COVID-19 may affect our collaboration to counter transnational crime."

The new network complements the ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime, which runs for 10 years from 2016 to 2025. SEAJust will cooperate with the ASEAN Secretariat but its scope extends beyond the bloc.

East Timor, which does not belong to ASEAN, is already on board. The participants plan to encourage countries outside the region to join the network as well, and intend to cooperate with similar organizations overseas.

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