

was sent to parliament on Tuesday after cabinet approval, after a wave of arrests over alleged same-sex relationships.

the UN's food agency warned that food aid could grind to a halt by April without new funding.

Leonean armed soldiers had entered its territory without authorisation. The dispute dates back to 1991.

online at a cost of 16 pesos about Shs77,513).

received distress calls from the group.

Hope for stranded Kenyans as US cracks down on scam cartels

Trafficking has involved Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos with victims often travelling through Vietnam and Thailand on tourism visas before they travel overland, or on water into the scam centres.

BY SAM KIPLAGAT

As hundreds of Kenyans stranded in Cambodia sued their government seeking an order to rescue them from bondage, US authorities moved in to stem the scammers it said were targeting Americans with digital fraud.

Washington's decision now means both the US and China are heavily invested in dealing with a problem that is increasingly becoming global, but hurting Africans the most in trafficking and bondage.

In Nairobi, lawyers representing some 610 Kenyans stranded in Cambodia on Monday petitioned the High Court to compel the government to evacuate them from where they have allegedly been stranded after falling for false allure of job opportunities in Southeast Asian nation.

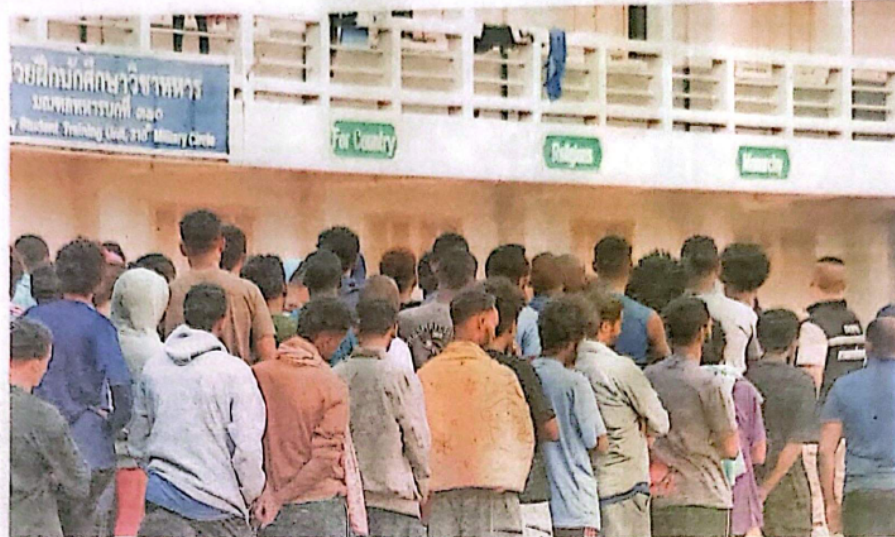
These Kenyans allege that they have contacted the Kenyan Embassy in Thailand (the nearest Kenyan diplomatic mission) for assistance, but little or no assistance has been provided to them.

Their lawyer Danstan Omari said Kenya's State Department for Diaspora Affairs have instead issued misleading statements that they have refused to return to Kenya.

"The Respondents, and in particular the 1st Respondent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Directorate of Immigration Services, the 6th Respondent, to forthwith issue or facilitate issuance of Emergency Travel Documents, temporary travel papers, passports, and any other necessary travel documentation to all affected Kenyan citizens stranded in Cambodia who lack valid travel documents," the petition stated.

If the court agrees, the Kenyan government could be forced to spend on their air tickets back home, including a rehabilitation programme. This has been a vicious cycle though.

Authorities in Kenya had argued earlier no one was heeding their advisory



Multinational victims of scam centres, who were trafficked into working in Myanmar and were sent to Thailand on February 12, 2025. PHOTO/REUTERS

Justification.

This is no longer just cybercrime. It's organised crime...I think our goal...is to ensure that any region is an inhospitable place for these scam centres to operate. This is not a problem that is unique

to any country." **Scott Schelble**, the US Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

against travelling to Cambodia. In fact, the problem of trafficking has involved Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos with victims often travelling through Vietnam and Thailand on tourism visas before they travel overland, or on water into the scam centres.

This week, the US labelled this Asian region as problematic, but said countries must now work collaboratively to tame a trafficking problem that is feeding other crimes.

In a virtual press briefing on Monday, Mr Scott Schelble, the US Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said Washington was investing in beating down the fraudsters due to direct losses on Americans, saying the scammers were a "global en-

terprise" of organised crimes.

"This is no longer just cybercrime. It's organised crime," Mr Schelble told reporters in a virtual briefing, after touring Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand.

He added: "It involves human trafficking, money laundering, and corruption all wrapped into one, and it's going to take that type of a cohesive, coordinated approach if we're going to successfully mitigate these scam centres."

The scammers recruit from as far as Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa and most other African countries, putting the recruits in some kind of forced labour to defraud people online.

The FBI said these transnational organised crime groups have scaled to an industrial level in Southeast Asia, stealing some \$2.9b (Shs10.34 trillion) from victims in 2025 alone.

According to the FBI, most of the scammers are led by Chinese organised crime syndicates running large-scale scam operations in the region and targeting Americans with well-resourced criminal enterprises that exploit foreigners, technology, and vulnerable people to generate enormous profits.

In January, however, China executed 11 members of a criminal gang convicted of luring foreigners—including Ken-

yan—into scam compounds in Myanmar, where they ran a billion-dollar online fraud and illegal gambling network.

The 11 were sentenced to death in September last year after being convicted of crimes including intentional homicide, fraud, illegal detention and running illegal gambling operations.

The criminal syndicate was convicted of running a vast online fraud and illegal gambling operation that generated more than \$1.4b (Shs4.99 trillion) according to Chinese state media and court records. The executions, approved by China's Supreme People's Court and carried out in eastern Zhejiang province, underscoring Beijing's own intensifying crackdown on transnational crime networks operating across Southeast Asia.

In December, Kenya's State Department for Diaspora Affairs confirmed that another 198 were still trapped in Myanmar.

In Cambodia, the stranded Kenyans said they are currently hounded in a local shelter in Cambodia and are in need of immediate repatriation back to the country and to receive medical care.

The petitioners also want the court to issue an order directing the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs and the Inspector General of Police to start investigations on the manner and persons that were involved in falsely representing to them, regarding the fraudulent job opportunities.

It is their claim that various individuals identifying themselves as agents guaranteed and made verbal undertakings that various employment opportunities were available to Kenyans of different qualifications in the form of casual to skilled labour.

However, upon arriving at the promised locations, they were allegedly faced with change of circumstances to which each of them was hurried onto another flight or cars and other means of transport to prevent escape.

They said they forcibly escorted by strange men deep into the woods to a location in which was run by Chinese persons and security guards once they arrived in Cambodia. The premises in which they were kept was surrounded with huge perimeter walls and barbed wire to prevent escape.

"Forthwith, the petitioners' phones, devices and passports were forcefully taken from them and immediately were subjected to forceful employment with terrible working conditions including but not limited to working continuously for 16 hours to meet extreme targets, which failure to meet, would result to torture in the form of beatings and destruction of the whole body," the petition added.

They claimed that several of them are victims of stabbings and internal bleeding and some are nursing open wounds and their lives are at risk and need immediate medical treatment. They further said the working environment was deplorable with minimal payment and extreme food rationing with some of them facing sexual harassment.

The FBI said it has deployed its agents to Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam to help deal with the threat. Yet Mr Schelble admitted the motivation for criminals may lie in the profits.

"As long as there are illicit gains to be made and there is an ease to do so, the situation will likely continue," he warned on Monday.

"I think our goal from a law enforcement perspective and from the sort of coordinated Strike Force aspect is to ensure that any region is an inhospitable place for these scam centres to operate. This is not a problem that is unique to any country."

Institutional weaknesses in other countries such as Myanmar, which has been at war since the junta seized power in 2021, but does not control the entire territory, have allowed organised syndicates to thrive. As a result, scam networks have flourished in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, exploiting lawlessness to commit fraud, human trafficking and drug trafficking.

Additional reporting by Aggrey Mutambo

610
KENYANS STRANDED
IN CAMBODIA