

UK crackdown on vile scam centres steps up with sanctions on illicit crypto network

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The UK has taken further action against a network that operates illegal scam centres across Southeast Asia.

- UK steps up action to protect British nationals from online fraud and prevent human rights abuses through new sanctions tackling “scam centres” in Southeast Asia.
- Targets include a major cryptocurrency-based marketplace on which would-be scam victims’ data is sold.
- Follows action last year, which triggered a wave of asset freezes and seizures around the world, and the closure of hundreds of scam centres.
- Comes ahead of the UK’s Illicit Finance Summit in June, which will drive international action to tackle dirty money.

A cryptocurrency network through which stolen personal data can be sold to fraudsters is sanctioned today as part of efforts to dismantle a network of ‘scam centres’, protect British nationals from online fraud, and prevent the exploitation of trafficked victims.

Across Southeast Asia, scam centres are using sophisticated schemes, including scams in which people are lured into fake romantic relationships, to defraud victims on an industrial scale, including in the UK.

Those conducting the scams are often trafficked foreign nationals, who have been lured into purpose-built scam compounds under the pretence of legitimate jobs, only to be trapped and forced to carry out online fraud under the threat of torture.

Last year, the UK, in coordination with the US, announced sanctions against the Prince Group and its Chairman Chen Zhi, who are responsible for a huge network of scam centres, triggering a wave of investigations and arrests across the region and freezes and seizures of assets worth over £1 billion.

Today the government has stepped up its fight against these scam centres, targeting the owners and operators of a recently identified facility known as ‘#8 Park’, believed to be Cambodia’s largest scam compound, with capacity to accommodate 20,000 trafficked workers.

The UK is also the first country to sanction Xinbi, one of the largest illicit marketplaces in Southeast Asia, which provides cryptocurrency-based services to scam centres – including #8 Park. These services include selling stolen personal data, which can be used to target scam victims, and satellite internet equipment, which is used to contact victims.

The UK’s sanctions will isolate the platform from the legitimate crypto ecosystem, significantly disrupting its operations by affecting its ability to send and receive cryptocurrency transactions. BYEX, another cryptocurrency platform that had been used to launder the proceeds of scams, shut down following the UK’s sanctions last year.

Minister of State for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories, Stephen Doughty said:

Our sanctions today send a clear message: We will not allow British people to become victims of these dreadful scams or tolerate the awful human rights abuses perpetrated in these scam centres.

We must keep up the pressure on dirty money and those who benefit from it. At the Illicit Finance Summit in June, the UK will drive international action to tackle the ways in which ill-gotten profits are laundered and moved around the world.

The individuals and entities targeted today include:

- Legend Innovation Co. – The operator of #8 Park, a recently identified scam compound linked to the Prince Group and thought to be Cambodia's largest. Legend Innovation Co.'s director, Eang Soklim, is also sanctioned.
- Xinbi – A Chinese-language online marketplace that enables the operation of scam centres in Southeast Asia by offering cryptocurrency-based services. It is one of the largest such marketplaces and has facilitated the laundering of stolen crypto assets by North Korea.
- Thet Li – A key lieutenant of Chen Zhi who has managed the Prince Group's international financial network, including in Taiwan.
- Hu Xiaowei – A long-term associate of Chen Zhi who has been unmasked as involved in the Prince Group's financial network under three different aliases.

Today's sanctions will have an immediate effect, further immobilising this scam network and its financial enablers, who have profited from the exploitation of vulnerable people.

A number of London properties will be frozen as a result of today's sanctions. This is in addition to the substantial UK assets already frozen by previous action against the network, including a £100 million office block in the City of London, two multi-million-pound mansions, and a helicopter.

Lord Hanson, Fraud Minister said:

Fraud is a global crime run by organised networks operating across borders and targeting victims at scale. That is why we are acting both at home and abroad.

The launch of our new Online Crime Centre will bring together the police, intelligence agencies and the private sector in the UK to shut down the channels scammers rely on.

Actions like these sanctions and working with international partners through the recently launched UK-backed INTERPOL Global Fraud Taskforce demonstrate our commitment to protect the public and disrupt criminals worldwide.

Following the UK actions, Cambodia's government has launched its largest ever crackdown on the scam economy, with local authorities estimating that 2,500 sites have been raided, leading to the closure of hundreds of scam centres and the release of tens of thousands of foreign nationals.

Today's sanctions support the actions being taken by Cambodia and other countries in the region.

At the UK's Illicit Finance Summit in June, the Foreign Secretary will drive renewed international commitment to tackle the misuse of property and crypto-assets to launder dirty money and move it across international borders.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-crackdown-on-vile-scam-centres-steps-up-with-sanctions-on-illicit-crypto-network>