



# CORRUPTION MONITOR



Photo by Ponnutat Ketjaiporn

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## JAC'S FIRST NEWSLETTER!

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the JAC Corruption Monitor.

We are the Journalists Against Corruption or JAC, a network of anti-corruption journalists covering southeast Asia. We are working together to boost and amplify anti-corruption reporting in the region.

We're launching this newsletter to monitor corruption stories in Southeast Asia and to introduce you to the journalists working on these important stories. We will also update you on JAC's activities and the investigative reports we are working on.

We are going to publish quarterly. In this inaugural edition, you will learn about the biggest corruption stories in the region. We also put a spotlight on online scams, an increasingly growing concern in the region.

We'll also tell you more about JAC and our participation in the biggest anti-corruption forum, the International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC), in Lithuania in June.

With your support, we hope to produce impactful stories and generate positive changes in government policies and business conducts.

Share our stories in your social media pages. Discuss our investigative reports. Join us in championing transparency and freedom of information. Send us tips!

Carmela Fonbuena  
PCIJ Executive Director  
and JAC Coordinator

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# CORRUPTION IN THE NEWS

April - June 2024

## VIETNAMESE BILLIONAIRE SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR MULTI-BILLION DOLLAR FRAUD

A Ho Chi Minh court sentenced tycoon Truong My Lan to death in April for her role in a multi-billion-dollar financial fraud case, an offshoot of the Communist party's wider crackdown on corruption.

Lan and her accomplices were accused of siphoning off more than 304 trillion dong from Saigon Joint Stock Commercial Bank (SCB), which she effectively controlled through dozens of proxies, according to investigators.

A local newspaper said 84 defendants in the case received sentences ranging from probation for three years to life imprisonment. ■



## 10 OFFENDERS IN SINGAPORE'S LARGEST MONEY LAUNDERING PROBE SENTENCED TO JAIL

Singapore courts convicted 10 foreigners for money laundering and forgery offenses in a case involving about S\$1 billion (\$737 million) of cash, properties, luxury cars and other assets.

All 10 pleaded guilty. They were sentenced to between 13 and 17 months in jail and their assets were forfeited,



Police seized cash and luxury items following simultaneous raids around the city state in August 2023. Photos courtesy of the Singapore Police Force

based on decisions handed down separately from April to June.

The nine men and one woman were part of a network that made a fortune in online gambling operations in the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Investigations found that they parked funds in major Singaporean and international banks, and channeled funds from Singapore to Dubai property investments.

Singapore Police has been sharing information through global policing networks in an attempt to track others involved in the network. Banks have reportedly been ramping up scrutiny of wealthy customers and potential clients to avoid exposure to illicit capital flows. The case also prompted Singapore to issue new measures to enhance its anti-money-laundering regime. ■



Photo courtesy of the NACC website

## School executive gets 20 years for accepting 'Tea money' in Thailand

While major cases dominate headlines around the region, day-to-day incidences of corruption have ongoing and harmful effects on people across the region.

In April, Thailand's Center Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases sentenced a former director and deputy director of a school to 20 years in prison for accepting "Tea Money" payments from six parents in exchange for enrolling their children in a selective school. ■

## Tools vs corruption launched

Various agencies have launched tools or initiatives seeking to shed light on or build capacity in combating corruption.



Photos of UNODC Deputy Regional Representative Benedikt Hofmann at the launch in Mongolia of an initiative to strengthen the country's law enforcement capabilities (left) and UNODC Regional Representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific Masood Karimipour at the launch in Bangkok of the report on waste trafficking trends.

These include the first-ever mapping of waste trafficking trends from Europe to Southeast Asia by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). This looked at how criminal actors exploit legal trade and regulatory and enforcement loopholes for financial gain.

Mongolia and the UNODC also launched a joint initiative in May to build capacities among law enforcement and anti-corruption training institutions to counter emerging threats such as drug trafficking, cyber-enabled crimes, and corruption. ■

## IACC pushes for protection for anti-corruption warriors

A range of advocates, journalists, and civil society groups across the world continue to work actively to combat corruption in its various forms. They often do so in environments where it is becoming increasingly difficult and often dangerous to do so.

At the 21st International Anti-Corruption Conference in Vilnius, Lithuania in June, participants passed the motion, titled "Defending the Defenders: The Time Is Now." The motion decried the criminalization of justice fighters around the world, including anti-corruption activists, and called for action from governments to ensure that journalists, activists, citizens and all those who defend integrity can live free of fear and persecution. ■

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SCAN ME



# SOUTHEAST ASIA IS ‘GROUND ZERO’ FOR ONLINE SCAMS — UNODC

Cybercrime, particularly online fraud, has become one of the dominant news in the region over the past five years. With reporting initially focused on Cambodia, it soon became clear that a massive industry has quietly grown at a remarkable pace, with large compounds springing up in Myanmar and Laos, and smaller scam operations scattered across Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

Southeast Asia has become the “ground zero” for the global scamming industry, according to Benedikt Hofmann, UNODC deputy regional representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The UNODC has observed a proliferation of post-pandemic illicit operations known as scam farms in Southeast Asia, including in the Philippines where transnational crime rings have operated alongside legal gambling businesses.

While the syndicates targeted victims across the world, much of their workforce is also victimized. Many are lured into the job with enticing perks but find themselves trapped, forced to scam people under threat of violence. The expansion of this industry has fed into the pre-existing regional money laundering ecosystem, as documented by UNODC.

During a visit to a scam farm in a province north of Manila in March, Hofmann observed work stations previously staffed by Vietnamese and Chinese workers targeting their respective countries’ markets.

In one such raid on a POGO hub in Bamban, Tarlac, Rappler reported that close to 700 Filipino, Chinese, Vietnamese and Malaysian workers were detained by the syndicate, including some who were tortured.

“There are multiple types of victims, the people who are being scammed around the world, but also the people

who are trafficked here held against their will and who are exposed to violence,” Hofmann said.

The police raid on the scam farm, run by the so-called Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs), has exposed criminal operations of online gambling, human trafficking, torture and possible hacking of websites.

An inquiry by Philippine senators into the POGO hub in Tarlac has also laid bare the alleged ties of its mayor, Alice Leal Guo, to a criminal network. Guo’s Filipino



Screenshot of the Philippine Senate’s livestream video

citizenship has also come into question.

According to Hofmann, many of the “more established” scam farms in the Mekong region bordering Thailand, Laos and Myanmar started out as casinos but morphed into hubs of scamming and cyber fraud.

“They are essentially turning into criminal service providers by selling cybercrime, scamming and money laundering services, but also data harvesting and disinformation,” he said.

With artificial intelligence (AI), scam farms could expand the scope and scale of their operations, Hofmann said. “That’s where the real threat for the future lies,” he said. ■

# JAC NOW HAS MEMBERS IN 9 COUNTRIES, HOLDS TRAINING ON PROBING ONLINE SCAMS



CLOCKWISE: UNODC expert on transnational organized crime John Wojcik joins Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism executive director Pushpan Murugiah and Cambodian independent journalist Mech Dara to give JAC members a comprehensive overview of online scam operations in the region; UNODC cybercrime expert Victor Lee shares tips on investigating corruption using open source information. He poses for a photo with UNODC colleague Megumi Hara and PCIJ's Rowena Paraan and Carmela Fonbuna; Tempo's Linda Trianita discusses opportunities for collaboration among JAC members; JAC members wear their national costume during a fellowship dinner on July 15, 2024.

The Journalists Against Corruption (JAC) expands its membership to nine countries in southeast Asia. The network of anti-corruption journalists now has members reporting from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam.

Four months after it was formed in March, it held its first in-person training of the network. It was held in Bangkok from July 15-16. Members of the anti-corruption network received training on investigating corruption in online scams, an increasingly alarming concern for many countries in the region.

## JAC JOINS BIGGEST ANTI-CORRUPTION FORUM IN VILNIUS



The International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) held in Lithuania in June 2024 highlighted the role of investigative journalists as well as data scientists and civil society organizations in fighting corruption around the world.

As one of the speakers, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) talked about the Journalists Against

Corruption or JAC. PCIJ spearheaded the formation of the network of anti-corruption journalists in Southeast Asia who committed to work together to investigate corruption in the region.

More than 25 journalists spoke in various plenary and breakout sessions at the Lithuanian Exhibition and Congress Centre in the capital Vilnius.

The conference gathered over 2,000 participants from more than 140 countries, working across a wide range of sectors. It was the biggest gathering of anti-corruption advocates. It featured best practices in addressing pressing global threats which are exacerbated by corruption. IACC pushed for commitments to uphold integrity to secure a "just, peaceful, and sustainable future for all."

The conference was organized by Transparency International.

# JAC IN ACTION

## MARCH 19, 2024: JAC is born in Manila

The Journalists Against Corruption (JAC) is a network of anti-corruption journalists that started with 35 members reporting from seven countries in southeast Asia. It was launched in Manila on March 19, 2024. The network has since expanded to 9 countries.



## JUNE 7, 2024: 2nd International Conference on Anti-Corruption Innovations in Southeast Asia

JAC's Carmela Fonbuena (PCIJ) and Khairil Yusof (Sinar Project) were invited to speak at the regional anti-corruption conference held in Bangkok, Thailand.



## JUNE 18-21, 2024: International Anti-Corruption Conference in Vilnius, Lithuania

JAC teams up with the UNODC and the Pacific Anti-Corruption Journalist Network (PACJN) at the International Anti-Corruption Conference to organize the panel on "Watching the Watchtower: Harnessing the Power of Collective Action." It was held in Vilnius, Lithuania.



## JUNE 25: Dialogue to identify corruption risks in the waste trade sector

JAC member Linda Trianita of Tempo Indonesia joins a roundtable discussion on corruption in waste trade. It was held in Bangkok, Thailand.



## JULY 15-16: JAC holds first in-person training in Bangkok, Thailand

JAC holds its first in-person training in Bangkok, Thailand four months after the network was formed in March. The participants received training on investigating online scams and on OSINT investigation skills.

