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46% of cyber frauds in India originate in Southeast Asia

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NEW DELHI: Jamtara and Mewat have been upstaged as hotspots of financial cyber fraud in India, with 46% of defrauded money now lost to cybercrimes like investment scams, digital arrest scams, trading scams and dating scams originating in southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Myanmar and Lao PDR. Organised cybercrime gangs, according to the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) CEO Rajesh Kumar, are operating 'corporate style' from compounds in these countries, hiring Indian job-seekers through illegal recruitment agents and then compelling them to defraud fellow citizens in India.

Between January and April this year, Rs 1,420 crore was lost to 62,587 investment scams, Rs 222 crore to 20,043 trading scams, Rs

120 crore to 4,600 digital arrest scams and Rs 13 crore to 1,725 romance/dating scams originating from southeast Asia, the I4C chief shared on Wednesday. In 2023, more than 1 lakh investment scams originating from southeast Asia were reported on the national cybercrime reporting portal and 10,000 FIRs registered.

Not ruling out China's involvement in these scams, Kumar said Chinese people were known to work in the scam compounds of southeast Asia and many of the suspected apps used for the cyberfrauds were also written in Chinese.

Amid an overall increase in big ticket frauds reported in 2024, with over 6 lakh complaints involving a total amount of Rs 7,061 crore received on the national cybercrime reporting portal, I4C has intervened to save Rs 812.7

crore from being defrauded. Collaboration between I4C and law enforcement agencies has helped debit-freeze 3.2 lakh mule accounts in last four months, get more than 3,000 URLs and 595 apps blocked under Information Technology Act and 5.3 lakh SIM cards and over 80,000 IMEI numbers suspended since July 2023. Also, 3,401 cases of unlawful content have been taken down from social media, websites and WhatsApp in last two months. Indians who are lured to southeast Asia's organised cybercrime factories with fake jobs advertised by illegal recruiters — detected in states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Delhi — are pushed into defrauding unsuspecting victims in India through social media advertisements and messaging promising quick financial gains on their investments or through gaming, digital arrests where the cyber offenders pose as a law enforcement personnel; or romance/dating scams. "These gangs work in an organised manner, from scam compounds...many of them were linked to casinos earlier," said Kumar.

The illicit gains from these cybercrime activities originating in southeast Asia are laundered through sophisticated financial channels including Indian bank accounts, cryptocurrency transactions, cash withdrawals, etc, he added.

In May this year, Visakhapatnam cybercrime police had arrested three illegal recruitment agents who were sending gullible youth to Cambodia. Similar arrests were carried out in Odisha as well. The India embassy in Phnom Penh has been ensuring the well-being of Indian citizens hired by these agents. Around 360 Indians were brought back from these compounds and 60 more will return soon.

The govt had earlier this month set up an inter-ministerial committee comprising various law enforcement and intelligence agencies to tackle the recent 'spurt' in transnational organised cyber crimes being launched against Indians from southeast Asian countries.