



**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

# Border Liaison Offices in Southeast Asia 1999-2009



## Ten Years of Fighting Transnational Organized Crime

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Cover photo: BLO Locations in Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam.  
Graphic by UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific.

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## UNODC Regional Programme Framework for East Asia and the Pacific 2009-2012

UNODC is mandated by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its additional protocols to address the issue of illicit trafficking of all kinds. A major pillar of the new UNODC Regional Programme Framework for East Asia and the Pacific 2009-2012 seeks to support member states efforts to strengthen the rule of law across the region. An important sub-component of this pillar includes strengthening border control in the fight against the illicit trafficking of all kinds, including drugs and precursors, human trafficking, the smuggling of migrants, natural resources, ozone depleting substances and hazardous waste.

At the sub-regional level, the Border Liaison Office (BLO) mechanism plays an important part in the UNODC regional centre's overall programmatic response to enhancing the rule of law and human security in Southeast Asia.

While cross border cooperation in the framework of the BLO mechanism is only a small part of the fight against illicit trafficking of all kinds, it has the potential to serve as a long term, sustainable mechanism to enhance regional law enforcement.

# From the Representative

In the coming decade, export-driven growth and major regional infrastructure upgrades in Southeast Asia will concentrate resources along key zones of movement – the so called “development corridors”. While these trends will be generally positive by lowering overall cost to consumers and boosting trade, they also portend increased opportunities for organized criminal groups to traffic illicit goods and smuggle people across borders.



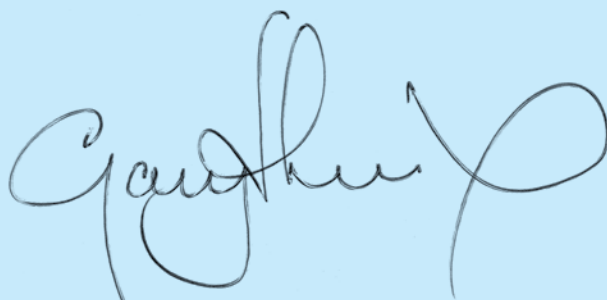
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific

Our region is arguably one of the world’s top source, transit and destination areas for human trafficking. For this reason, the effort to curtail and stop trafficking will remain at the top of UNODC’s agenda in the region. The same goes for our effort to reduce the flow of illicit drugs and the smuggling of migrants in the region.

What is now coming more into focus is the damage done to our environment by transnational organized crime groups. Highly organized timber barons and well-informed mafias are increasingly involved in the illegal timber and wildlife trades, devastating vast swathes of precious forests and ecosystems while reaping millions of dollars in profits with impunity. On a global scale, the problem is so acute that more than a third of all timber exports are illegally sourced and “green crimes” may be worth as much as \$40 billion a year, about ten percent of the value of the international trade in narcotics. The illegal disposal of hazardous waste and ozone depleting chemicals is also a big business which endangers the public health of current and future generations.

All these transnational cross border crimes need to be confronted by a coordinated regional and sub-regional response at all levels, starting with operational law enforcement on the ground. Unfortunately, law enforcement agencies have tended to lag behind transnational organized crime groups in terms of adaptability, adoption of new technology and effective networking. All too often, inadequate technical capacity and insufficient cooperation among law enforcement agencies across borders has reduced the effectiveness of national authorities in handling the range of transnational crimes confronting the region.

Our new Regional Programme Framework for East Asia and the Pacific (2009-2012) places great importance on strengthening border control to tackle a range of illicit cross-border trafficking. For the past 10 years, the BLO mechanism has played a key role in strengthening cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia. It is my sincere hope that the BLO mechanism will continue to play an essential and expanded role in the future as part of a sustained regional response to illicit trafficking of any sort.



Gary Lewis  
Representative  
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime  
Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific  
Bangkok, Thailand

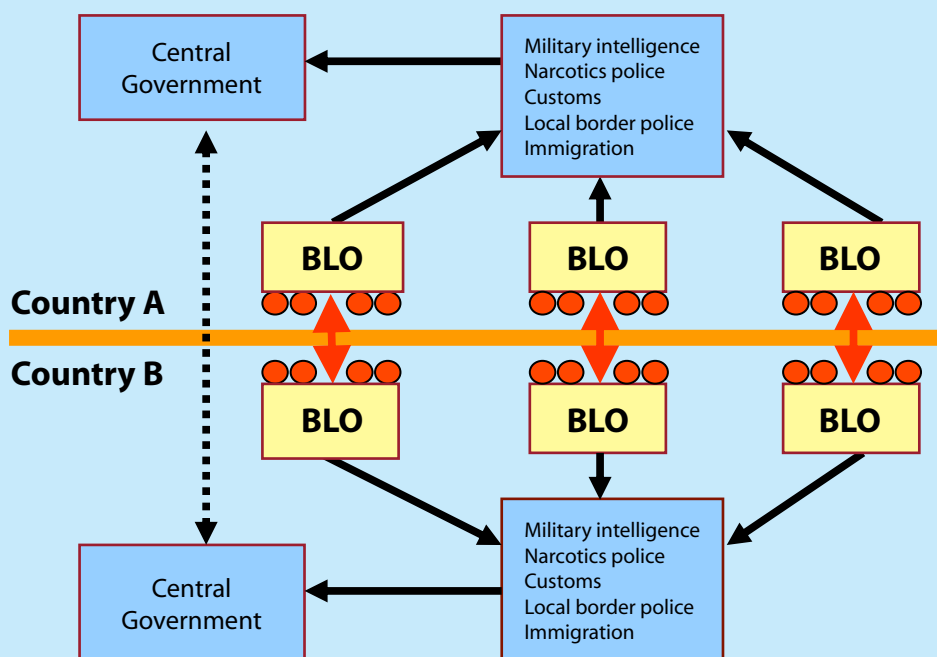
# What is a Border Liaison Office?

A Border Liaison Office (BLO) is a co-ordinating office for national law enforcement agencies which facilitates and promotes greater cross-border cooperation. Starting in 1993, the six countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam) agreed to cooperate on counternarcotics efforts under a Memorandum of Understanding including through border control cooperation. Located close to recognised border crossings, the BLO on each side of the national border acts as a centralised clearing house for information received from the vicinity of border areas. Currently, this information relates to drug trafficking only.

BLOs are typically staffed by five to seven officers from frontline law enforcement agencies including narcotics, border, local and immigration police as well as customs officers. BLO officers patrol the borders and serve as focal points for relaying important intelligence information to their counterparts.

BLOs promote communication and cooperation between different national law enforcement agencies working along the border. They also foster greater cross-border law enforcement cooperation through the sharing of real time information on drug traffickers to enable fast and effective intervention by law enforcement officers on the other side of the border. BLO counterparts meet on a regular basis both formally and informally to exchange intelligence. Periodically, regional BLO workshops are held to disseminate the latest *modus operandi* of traffickers and the trafficking routes.

## The BLO Mechanism



● Border activities including intelligence, information gathering, follow up action and general enquiries

←...→ Flow of information between central governments

← Flow of information/intelligence

↕ Flow of real time information between border liaison staff

— National borders

**BLO** Border Liaison Office

# BLO Locations



*The borders on this map imply no endorsement of any territorial claims*

## Key:

- 41 BLOs established during the period 1999 - 2006 with UNODC support.
- 11 BLOs established during the period 2007 - present\* with UNODC support.\*\*
- 18 BLOs established through bilateral agreements between the governments of Thailand/Cambodia and Thailand/Lao PDR independently of UNODC.

70 BLOs are in operation in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The independent establishment of BLOs by the countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region reflects the success of the border liaison office concept and its potential for long term sustainability. 52 BLOs have so far received assistance from UNODC.

\* As of February 2009.

\*\* 3 BLOs have subsequently been maintained by bilateral agreement between Thailand and Cambodia.

# A Brief History



Port activity at Guan Lei, China  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific

## 2009

UNODC in partnership with UNEP and international NGOs supports the expansion of the BLO mechanism to cover human trafficking, migrant smuggling, environmental and wildlife crimes in the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

## 2007

UNODC sets up a further nine BLOs and consolidates the existing BLOs in the Greater Mekong Sub-region with new equipment and further training.

## 2003

Joint BLO patrols on the Mekong River begin at the Houay Xai (Lao PDR) – Chiang Khong (Thailand) border.

## 2000

First BLO begins operations at Mengla (China) / Ban Boten (Lao PDR) and UNODC introduces Computer Based Training (CBT) modules.

## 1999

Recognising the need to take action against cross-border illicit drug trafficking, Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam sign an agreement to establish 41 BLOs across the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

# Why do we need BLOs?



*BLO activities under UNODC support  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific*

- To encourage cooperation along and across national borders to enable direct communication of real time information sharing leading to drug seizures and the capture of traffickers
- To foster cooperation between different national border law enforcement agency units working at the borders for improved multilateral law enforcement
- To strengthen and facilitate the regional intelligence network on illicit drug trafficking and to prevent illicit trafficking at the borders
- To carry out joint operations against TOC in the region building trust and mutual understanding
- To promote the dissemination of changing trends and new developments in cross-border trafficking

# How does UNODC set up the BLO mechanism?

- **UNODC and the partner countries carry out an initial needs analysis to determine level of capacity building required.**
- **UNODC provides Computer Based Training (CBT) in all local languages to train border law enforcement officials.**
- **UNODC provides essential communication equipment such as radio networks and vehicle support to strengthen national borders.**
- **UNODC staff, along with national drug control authorities, visit BLOs on a regular basis to monitor progress.**
- **UNODC assists in the organisation of national and regional workshops to disseminate best practice and new drug and crime trends.**

## Building Sustainable BLOs: Key factors for success

**The following factors are essential if UNODC is to serve as an effective mediator and facilitator to the BLO mechanism:**

- Political will from the highest government levels
- National support: regular budgeting, infrastructure, equipment and investment for staff capacity building
- Positive response toward cooperation from national law enforcement agencies
- Positive attitude by BLO officers toward cooperation with their counterparts
- Qualified personnel with good language skills and a clear understanding of responsibilities
- BLO location must be close to the border to facilitate information exchange
- Sustainable funding from donor countries and cooperation with international organisations



# BLO Achievements: Cases from the borders



Mae Sai BLO in operation  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific

## 2001: Drug seizures in China

In May 2001, Chinese police at Mengla launched a joint operation with their Lao PDR counterparts. During a 2-month operation, 17 suspects including 5 Lao PDR nationals and 14.5kg of morphine was seized by China and Lao PDR police.

## 2004: ATS haul at Thai-Cambodia border

In 2004, cooperation between Thailand and Cambodia (Aranyaprathet-Poi Pet) led to the seizure of 15,800 tablets of ATS and 2,144 bottles of ketamine.

## 2005: Han Yongwan syndicate busted

In 2005, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand police jointly broke the “Han Yongwan” transnational drug syndicate with the seizure of more than 400 kg of heroin. By the end of 2006, China, Lao PDR and Viet Nam had carried out almost 100 joint operations in the border areas. More than 800kg of heroin, methamphetamine and various illicit drugs were seized and 400 drug traffickers and users were arrested during the joint operations.

## 2006: Chiang Rai drugs raid

In May 2006 a coordinated effort by Myanmar and Thai law enforcement agencies led to the arrest of two notorious drug traffickers. They were arrested at Chiang Rai with 20,000 amphetamines tablets and 1,000 ecstasy tablets. Further joint investigations led to the recovery of a vehicle containing 80,000 amphetamine tablets.

## 2007: Crackdown on drugs at Lao PDR – Viet Nam border

Seven cases were solved during 2007 as a result of cooperation between Lak Xao (Lao PDR) and Cau Treo (Viet Nam). Nine offenders were arrested with over 1,000kg of cannabis and 488 tablets of methamphetamine. As of April 2008, 16 cases were solved at the same BLOs leading to the arrest of 23 offenders with 322 kg of cannabis.

## 2008: Myanmar steps up action on drug trafficking

Between January and October 2008 Tachileik BLO, Myanmar registered 11 cases of opiates (3kg), 27 cases of methamphetamine (83,000 tablets) and a seizure of 6kg of ice, among other drugs and precursors.

# Joint Patrols on Mekong River: A BLO Success Story



Joint patrol over Mekong River between Lao PDR and Thai BLOs  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific

“Before the joint patrols on Mekong river, when traffickers along the river realised they had been detected, they simply moved over to the other side where law enforcement officials were not aware of their activities and thus escaped from arrest and were able to continue transporting the drugs.”

*BLO officer,  
Chiang Khong, Thailand*

*Ranong BLO in operation  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific*



The Mekong River has always been an important waterway in the region for the transportation of goods and people. Unfortunately, in recent years, it has also become a major route of illegal trafficking of drugs and precursors. Large quantities of precursors have been known to be transported from China for use in clandestine ATS laboratories across the region. Opiates produced in Myanmar have also been shipped along the Mekong River to Laos for further transportation to Thailand and onward onto international markets.

Following lengthy and sensitive discussions, a joint operational agreement between the two countries had earlier been reached in May 2003. It was thereafter decided that joint patrols should take place along the river at BLO offices located at Houay Xai (Lao PDR) and Chiang Kong (Thailand). June 10<sup>th</sup> 2003 was a historic moment in the history of the Mekong River. On this day, joint river patrols between Thailand and Lao PDR began with support from UNODC.

This assistance included the provision of speed boats, water pumps, boat trailers, handheld radios, binoculars, spare boat propellers and the operational costs associated with the joint patrols.

Since 2003, regular joint patrols along the Mekong River have enabled Lao PDR and Thailand to share and coordinate real time information leading to significant seizures of drugs and the arrest of traffickers. UNODC support for the joint Mekong River patrols ended in 2006 but the sustainability of the BLO mechanism has since been ensured by the efforts of both the government of Lao PDR and Thailand under the support of the United States government. Regular joint patrols continue along the Mekong River sharing information and intelligence to coordinate their anti-narcotics operations.

# BLO Focus: Chiang Khong



Mr Suthep Tiewtrakul

Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific

In an interview with UNODC on 9 October 2008, District Officer and Head of Chiang Khong BLO, Mr. Suthep Tiewtrakul explains the challenges facing the BLO mechanism. The Chiang Khong BLO is located in Northern Thailand and has cooperated with its counterpart Lao PDR BLO at Bokeo since 2005.

## **UNODC: What is the value of the BLO?**

**Suthep:** The BLO is a very important instrument to counter drug trafficking. The BLO is valuable not only to Thailand but to the region as a whole and it is needed to develop better cross border relations. It is difficult at times to overcome traditional attitudes that can be deeply rooted in history that works against cooperation between neighbouring countries of this region, but that is all the more reason to work through the BLO mechanism to try to create a more positive mentality and outlook.

## **UNODC: Have the trends in illegal cross border trafficking changed in recent years?**

**Suthep:** The flow of illicit drugs has always been from neighbouring countries through Lao PDR and into Thailand for further transportation inland toward Bangkok to serve the local and international markets. In terms of drug trafficking, we have noticed greater seizures of Amphetamine Type Stimulants along our border in recent years. Chiang Khong BLO has not yet expanded its mandate to human trafficking, but we expect this will come soon. With ongoing economic development along with the disparities of the region, illegal human trafficking will become more serious in the coming years.

## **UNODC: Has the Computer Based Training been useful for your BLO staff?**

**Suthep:** Yes, UNODC support has assisted border law enforcement officers to reinforce their knowledge acquired through our own training programmes. But effective training is only part of the issue. The most important aspect of the BLO mechanism to build cooperative relationships with our neighbours. Training BLO staff alone will be useless if joint cooperation cannot be achieved.

## **UNODC: Can your BLO officers easily cross the border to exchange information and intelligence?**

**Suthep:** Regular communication with our counterparts on the Lao PDR side through telephone exchanges does take

place and we have organized a few social events, but we have not reached a stage where our BLO staff can informally cross the Mekong River to meet our counterparts on the other side for intelligence cooperation. Differences in political systems and cultures in Thailand and Lao PDR contribute to difficulties at the working level. At times this creates an “invisible curtain” which works against cooperation. For example, political frictions last year between our two countries brought about a temporary suspension of the joint Mekong River Patrols. The BLO mechanism does not automatically guarantee success but efforts are being made at the national level to resume the joint patrols, and we hope to achieve greater cooperation in the future.

*“Despite the ups and downs, we need to build on the positive cooperation achieved so far...”*

## **UNODC: What are your views on the proposed expansion of the BLO Mandate to environmental crimes and what is your vision for the future of the BLO mechanism?**

**Suthep:** Despite the ups and downs, we need to build on the positive cooperation achieved so far and look to the future. It will take time and effort for the BLO mechanism to succeed, but that is no reason to stop cross border cooperation altogether. It is important for the BLO mandate to expand to include both human trafficking and environmental and wildlife crimes to deal with transnational organized crime in a comprehensive manner. While trying to maintain a sustainable budget and up-to-date equipment for the BLO office is necessary, the most important thing is to foster real understanding between our neighbours on the need to make the BLO mechanism work for our mutual interest.

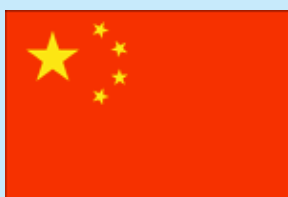
# BLO Country Profiles



**Cambodia:** 11 BLOs have been established in Cambodia on the borders with Thailand, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. In total, 108 officers work at the BLOs. Each member has specific work assigned and remains at the border for more than 4 years. The BLOs also receive support from local government for running cost expenditures, officer's salaries investigations and operational activities. Numerous national and regional seminars, study trips, and workshops have been conducted since 2003. Cambodia recently requested UNODC to integrate all available training and modules on counter-human trafficking and chemical precursor control into the CBT system.



**Myanmar:** 8 BLOs have been established in Myanmar. BLO operations in Myanmar have led to a timely exchange of information and numerous joint operations as well as monthly meetings with counterparts on new trafficking routes and concealment methods. Additional training on tackling human trafficking was held in December 2007 between China and Myanmar. This triggered active cooperation between BLOs in Myanmar and China to combat trafficking in persons. In cooperation with UNODC RCEAP, the BLO mandate will be expanded to cover human trafficking and migrant smuggling at several BLOs in Myanmar.



**China:** 7 BLOs have been established in China since 1999 with direct support from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific. Each BLO is operated by 2 to 6 officers from Drug Control Police, Border Control Police, Customs, Foreign Affairs Office and Military Service. Regular meetings with counterparts take place every 2 months. China's commitment to the BLO mechanism has also been reflected in the support it has provided to a number of its neighbours to ensure that the level of enforcement and cooperation is balanced on both sides of the border.



**Thailand:** 18 BLOs have been established in Thailand. The BLOs in Thailand have also assumed additional activities such as the joint Mekong River Patrol with Lao PDR and have effectively developed cross border cooperation with the neighbouring countries and have significantly reduced the trafficking and smuggling of drugs across its borders. Cross border training, meetings and workshops are held regularly.



**Lao PDR:** 18 BLOs have been established with Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. Checkpoints exist only along principal land routes and river crossings, leaving large areas along the remote borders with little or no oversight. However, the BLOs actively contribute to cross border cooperation and have had a great impact in suppressing drug trafficking in the region.



**Viet Nam:** 8 BLOs have been established in Viet Nam. All police, customs, border army officers and officers from other related agencies such as health, trading and industrial sectors posted at the BLOs receive CBT training. Since the start of 2007, over 80 cases have been recorded with more than 200 traffickers arrested and over 61 kg of heroin, 600 kg of cannabis and 94,000 tablets of ATS seized.

# Expanding the BLO Mandate: Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling



Daily activities for border crossing at Poi Pet/Cambodia and Aranyapathet/Thailand  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific

Disparities in wealth and the uneven distribution of the benefits of economic development have fuelled the dreams of young people in poor rural communities to seek better lives in the more prosperous cities of the region. Tragically, poverty, accompanied by a lack of education and employment opportunities has provided fertile ground for unscrupulous human smugglers and traffickers. Criminal groups with advancing levels of organisation and networking are increasingly generating profits from transporting and facilitating the illegal entry of migrants into destination countries and through the ongoing exploitation of trafficked persons in multiple forms including hard labour and sexual exploitation. The ILO estimates that the criminal profits from human trafficking or forced labour in Asia and the Pacific amounts to US\$9.7 billion annually.

As road infrastructure develops rapidly in the Greater Mekong Sub-region countries, increasingly high volumes of pedestrian, private and commercial vehicular traffic will be passing through the border points. The increased flow of legal migration will inevitably be accompanied by a significant rise in illegal migrants prepared to use the services of smugglers to seek a better life elsewhere. As a result, migrant smuggling has become a diversified industry offering a range of services at differing cost, with the migrant bearing a greater risk of danger and harm for lower cost services. The irregular status of such smuggled migrants upon arrival at their destination means that they may enter debt-bondage arrangements with exorbitant repayment rates, perhaps subjected to forced labour or prostitution, entering a cycle of violence and become trafficking victims. In East Asia and the Pacific, an estimated 1.36 million people are in forced labour as a result of trafficking in persons (ILO Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, ILO, 2008). Some illegal migrants subjected to inhuman conditions during transportation never make it to their promised destinations.

Grey areas of overlap exist between human trafficking and migrant smuggling, but there are also important differences. Migrant smuggling is a transnational crime by definition committed against the state. The crime is complete when a smuggler procures a consenting person illegal entry to a country where they are neither a national nor resident. Human trafficking can take place internally or across borders without the consent of the trafficked person, or where consent is meaningless.

The exploitation of men, women and children continues in

factories, domestic work of forced prostitution in brothels after reaching the final destination.

Two major weaknesses consistently identified by UNODC missions to the Greater Mekong Sub-region over many years have been the lack of adequately trained personnel and lack of awareness among relevant actors that human trafficking and migrant smuggling are criminal activities that pose serious risks to both individuals and communities. This has been particularly the case among border officials who have a low level of awareness of national anti-trafficking and anti-migrant smuggling structures and focal points. Where there is no awareness of human trafficking or migrant smuggling, trafficked persons and illegal migrants have been able to cross borders undetected. Where there is awareness but little understanding, smuggled migrants or trafficked persons may be intercepted but are simply turned back from a border with neither repatriation assistance nor follow up action taken to bring smugglers or traffickers to justice. In these circumstances there is a vital need for relevant officials to be able to identify human trafficking and migrant smuggling and to understand that illegal migrants are vulnerable to trafficking for forced labour or sexual exploitation. However, even if both awareness and understanding of human trafficking and migrant smuggling exists, the response often remains ineffective due to the lack of capacity to patrol borders, treatment and care for migrants and trafficked persons, and facilitate their safe repatriation. The fact that migrant smugglers and human traffickers constantly change routes and adapt their *modus operandi* in response to new migration regulations and other changed circumstances means that coordination and communication both along and across borders is essential.

The expansion of the BLO mandate will create an environment where valuable information provided by the victims or traffickers can be exchanged across borders and acted upon to pursue higher level trafficking and smuggling syndicates. The BLO mechanism is a direct contribution to both the Bali Process, which seeks to enhance operational level cooperation to combat migrant smuggling, and the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) Plan of Action against human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region signed in 2004. Already recognised by all countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region and beyond as a benchmark in multilateral law enforcement, the BLO mechanism holds great promise as a genuine regional response to a growing transnational challenge.

# BLO action against Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling: How will it work?



*Cambodian crossing Thai border for daily income  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific*

- A first step in the expansion of the BLO mandate will be to raise awareness among border law enforcement officials through national, bilateral or regional workshops on the risks of trafficking, its root causes, and the available services and facilities offered by other national agencies, NGOs and international NGOs.
- Awareness-raising workshops will be complemented with updated CBT modules to share the best operational practices for tackling the two distinct crimes of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. UNODC will distribute these modules to all BLOs throughout the region. Available in all local languages, they will be easily accessible to law enforcement personnel working within the locality of a BLO.
- Building mutual trust between BLO staff on both sides of a border does not take place overnight, but once a certain level of trust has developed over time through both formal and informal exchanges and meetings, the likelihood of interception and prosecution in cases of traffickers and smugglers through joint investigations will be much greater.
- BLO action against human trafficking and migrant smuggling also aims to deliver training to border law enforcement officers on victim/witness protection. All too often, where victims of trafficking have been intercepted, they have themselves been treated as criminals and offered little if any care and assistance. Cross border workshops on victim treatment and repatriation will be held with a focus on delivering victim referral training to help ensure the safe reintegration of trafficked victims, and all BLOs will be equipped with a list of relevant victim support service providers operating in the local area.
- Most importantly, it is the commitment and dedication of law enforcement personnel at the BLOs that is of the greatest significance in the continuing success of BLO measures. As an ongoing mutual trust-building exercise across borders, BLO training and workshops must be combined with a strong commitment and positive attitude among all BLO personnel toward a single common goal of fighting transnational crime.

## Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia

- The ILO estimates that the minimum number of persons in forced labour, including sexual exploitation, as a result of trafficking at any given time is 2.4 million. In Asia and the Pacific alone, 1.4 million are trapped in forced labour. (Action against trafficking in human beings, ILO, 2008)
- The number of people trafficked annually from and within the Greater Mekong Sub-region is estimated at between 200,000 and 450,000. (IOM Southeast Asia Website [www.iom-seasia.org](http://www.iom-seasia.org) 2008)
- At a country level, China and Thailand are both ranked very high as origin countries, with Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines and Viet Nam ranked high as countries of origin. Thailand ranks very high in the citation index as an origin, transit and destination country. (Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns, UNODC, 2006)
- For the East and Southeast Asia region as a whole, as many as one out of every four migrant workers may be in an irregular status (Situation report on international migration in East and Southeast Asia, IOM, 2008)

# Expanding the BLO Mandate: Environmental Crimes



*Slash and burn for illegal forestry in Indonesia  
Photo: UNODC Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific*

Environmental crime is becoming one of the most profitable and fastest growing new areas of international criminal activity in Southeast Asia. Environmental crime includes a range of illicit activities from illegal logging, the illicit trafficking of timber and wildlife products, the smuggling of ozone depleting substances (ODS) and the illicit trade in hazardous waste – all acts that directly harm the environment. In recent years, environmental crime has developed into a sophisticated network of criminal as well as corrupt legitimate organisations operating on an industrial scale.

By overexploiting forests, wildlife, marine resources, and smuggling hazardous wastes, criminal groups undermine the stability of the ecosystems and their ability to provide clean air, hydrological stability and food to future generations. Economically marginalised communities whose livelihoods are more directly linked to dependence on natural resources are particularly hard hit. The depletion of biodiversity also harms the future ability of exporting countries to profit from their natural resources. It is estimated that developing countries lose up to \$15 billion in revenues and taxes from illegal logging alone (Environment Crime: A Threat to our Future, Environmental Investigation Agency, 2008). It is estimated that in many countries of Southeast Asia some large animal species, such as elephants, tigers, and wild cattle have become extinct or virtually extinct, due to hunting and wildlife trade. As a result of criminal greed and illicit profit-seeking, Southeast Asia is experiencing the fastest rates of deforestation in the world, especially in Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar and Timor-Leste. (State of the World's Forests 2007, FAO, 2007). Estimated percentages of illegally logged timber (out of the total harvest) in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region countries are 90% in Cambodia, 45% in Lao PDR, 40% in Thailand and 20-40% in Viet Nam (Seneca Creek Associates/Wood Resources International, 2004). The extent of illegal logging, wildlife trafficking and the smuggling of hazardous wastes coupled with weak national capacities among the Greater Mekong Sub-region countries to enforce national and international regulations represent a major threat to sound and sustainable development in the region.

Environmental crime in Southeast Asia is made easier by porous borders and law enforcement authorities with low levels of awareness and training about illicit timber trafficking, illegal wildlife products and the smuggling of hazardous wastes. Coordination between national law enforcement agencies and their counterparts across the borders are also weak. For these reasons, international crime syndicates are increasingly turning their attention to environmental crime where high profits can be reaped with low risk. The expansion of the BLO mandate to cover environmental crimes marks an important step forward in the regional response to tackle transnational organized crime in Southeast Asia and offers an important model for the greater East Asia and Pacific region.

**“People are profiting from the destruction of our planet, by dumping hazardous waste, illegal logging, or the theft of bio-assets. This crime not only damages the eco-system, it impoverishes so many countries where pollution, deforestation and populations displacement trigger conflict and prevent reaching the MDGs.”**

Antonio Maria Costa  
Executive Director  
United Nations  
Office on Drugs and Crime

*Indonesian customs officers inspect a seizure of smuggled CFC cylinders at Tanjung Priok Port, Jakarta, Indonesia.  
Photo: Environmental Investigation Agency*





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