







# CRIMINALS WITHOUT BORDERS

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED RACKETS ENGAGED IN DRUG SMUGGLING, HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND MONEY-LAUNDERING ARE A GLOBAL MENACE. THE UAE HAS CAST THE NET WIDER TO COMBAT THEM

BY ORLANDO WILSON



*Lt General HH Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, during his keynote address at the 87th Interpol General Assembly in Dubai in November 2018*

All too often, when people fall for an exceedingly lucrative money-making deal; or give in to the temptation of a job offer overseas; or agree to carry a sealed package in return for a fat courier fee, they don't know that they've walked into a trap. Transnational criminals have their fingers in every rotten pie — money-laundering, human trafficking, narcotics, smuggling the body parts of endangered animals, and more. Not only do they prey on targets, but they also pull people into their dark world as accomplices, threatening social harmony and national security.

Media headlines again reminded people about transnational crime in August 2021, when the Dubai Court of Appeal increased the jail term of a gang of Asians convicted in a human trafficking case. Four out of six people in the gang had their jail term

increased from 7 years to 10 years; and the other two had their term increased from 3 years to 7 years. They were all involved in keeping a girl trapped in an apartment and forcing her into prostitution.

The girl, aged 15, had been asked by a woman in her own country to come to the UAE and work as a maid. The girl had refused at first, but the woman went on persuading her and eventually the girl agreed. Then the woman put her in touch with another contact, who handled the girl's passport and visa. When the minor arrived in the UAE, expecting to be taken to her place of work, she was instead taken to that apartment and held a prisoner. The gang was busted after the police conducted a sting operation, with a detective posing as a client.

The girl's case — a fake job offer and then sexual slavery — is one of the most

common forms of human trafficking, and the UAE frequently sees these cases because it's such an attractive work destination for people from many other nations.

To combat all types of cross-border organised crime, the UAE, which has made security the central pillar of its nation-building strategy, collaborates with a number of international security organisations, including the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol). Because these criminals are not limited by countries' borders — their operations are now a combination of physical and digital — investigation and arrest also have no borders and all countries need to work together. The UAE signed the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC) in 2002 and ratified the convention in 2007.

In November 2018, the UAE hosted the 87th General Assembly of Interpol, attended by more than 1,000 official delegates from 195 countries, including 40 ministers and 85 police chiefs. His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, and Lieutenant General His Highness Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, inaugurated the general assembly at Madinat Jumeirah in Dubai.

On another occasion, emphasising on how several types of transnational crimes were linked to each other, Saud Al Shamsi, Deputy Permanent Representative and Chargé d'affaires of the UAE to



*Human trafficking victims rescued by Interpol in 'Operation Liberterra', participated in by the UAE Ministry of Interior last July 2021*



the UN, said, “As the main commercial and financial centre of the Middle East, the UAE works diligently to combat international extremism and organised crime. There is a growing linkage between extremists and criminals from organised crime syndicates. Extremists benefit from the trafficking of persons, weapons, cultural property, natural resources, and financial resources to support their operations. Therefore, the elimination of international terrorism requires disrupting every source of financial and logistical support, including organised crime.”

**COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

With a very large population of expats, and job opportunities being varied, people from all walks of life come to work in the UAE. That makes it easy for human traffickers to promise jobs to victims and then enslave them once they leave their country. The UAE is aware of this problem and has legal and rehabilitation infrastructure to deal with this.

In July 2021, the UAE Ministry of

**“ The elimination of international terrorism requires disrupting every source of financial and logistical support, including organised crime**



**SAUD AL SHAMSI**

Deputy Permanent Representative and Chargé d'affaires of the UAE to the UN

Interior (MoI) worked with Interpol on ‘Operation Liberterra’, which involved 47 other nations and targeted migrant smuggling and human trafficking gangs. This operation resulted in 286 individuals being arrested and 430 victims of human trafficking being released internationally.

Speaking of the MoI’s pivotal role in this global operation, after hosting the operation room of the joint forces from the Middle East, Asia and North Africa, Lt Col Dana Humaid, Director General of the International Affairs Bureau at the Ministry said: “Human trafficking is one of the major security threats being faced by countries across the world. It has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry led by organised criminal groups. While it is challenging to determine the scale of the problem, experts agree that millions of victims are trafficked every year, either for forced labour, sexual exploitation, removal of organs, or people smuggling. The

human cost that extends beyond the victims, families, friends, and communities is incalculable.”

“This is why we are proud that the UAE has been able to support Interpol in this important and successful operation. As

**THE NUMBERS**

**1st**

The UAE was the first country in the region to enact a strict anti-human trafficking law in 2016, which has been amended over time to specifically cover the crimes of sexual exploitation, prostitution, organ trafficking, and other related crimes.

**Dhs10,000 and jail term**

Penalty and punishment for people who publish the names or photographs of victims or witnesses involved in human trafficking cases, according to the UAE Public Prosecution.

**Up to Dhs1.6 trillion**

Total worth value of transnational organised crime operations per year which accounts for 7 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product, according to the Global Initiative, an independent civil-society organisation, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland.



**“The UAE has been an active player in the campaign against human trafficking, and firmly believes in the importance of strong national as well as international efforts to combat human trafficking**



**LT COL DANA HUMAID**

Director General of the International Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Interior

many of you will know, the UAE has been an active player in the campaign against human trafficking, and firmly believes in the importance of strong national as well as international efforts to combat human trafficking,” she stressed. “However, given the transnational nature of human trafficking, no country can combat human trafficking by itself. It is critical that there is cross-border cooperation. This is where Interpol plays a critical role. It facilitates the sharing of information and operational collaboration between member countries.”

In 2006, the UAE was the first country in the region to enact a strict anti-human trafficking law, which has been amended over time to specifically cover the crimes of sexual exploitation, prostitution, organ trafficking, and other related crimes. Law enforcement in the UAE always has worked to protect the victims of crimes or witnesses of crimes, especially those connected to human trafficking cases.

On July 30, 2021, marking the World Day against Trafficking in Persons, the UAE Public Prosecution made a clear statement that there would be imprisonment and fines of not less than Dh\$10,000 against those people who publish by any means the names or photographs of victims or witnesses involved in human trafficking cases.

The Abu Dhabi Shelter and Humanitarian Care Centre (Ewa'a) is for women and children who are victims of



Officers at the Ministry of Interior during its hosting of an Operation Coordination Unit for 'Operation Libertaerra'

INTERPOL

human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Ewa'a is responsible for providing care, safe shelter, health, and psychological care to victims of human trafficking and all forms of domestic violence. The centre's responsibilities also include developing human trafficking and domestic abuse awareness programmes to prevent crimes.

The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC) is the first licensed non-profit shelter in the emirate for women and children who are victims of domestic violence and human trafficking in the UAE. It was established in July 2007 to offer victims immediate protection and support services, in accordance with international human rights regulations and UAE laws. The DFWAC provides free services to women and children in its care. The services include a helpline, safe shelter, case management, medical care, psychological support, counselling, legal, consular and immigration assistance.

There are additional centres under the supervision of Abu Dhabi Police that provide all necessary support for victims of human trafficking in conjunction with the relevant government agencies.

**SENSATIONAL ARRESTS**

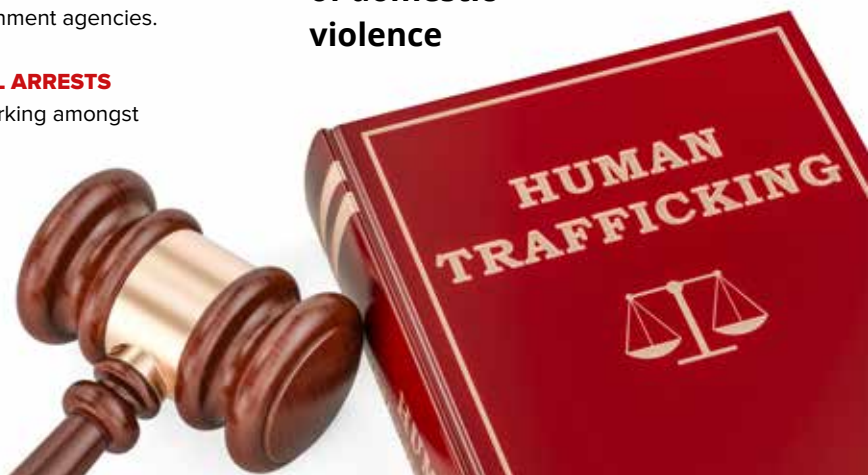
Close networking amongst international crimefighting agencies is essential to combat organised crime, which is

a disease that spreads rapidly when it gets a foothold in an area, city, or country.

On the surface, these criminals usually give the appearance of being established businesspeople to hide their illegal dealings and activities. They use their fake personas to win the trust and confidence of those around them, so they can seek out future accomplices or future victims.

The criminals' strategy is to entrap their victims and then exploit them. After winning a victim's trust, the criminals will ask for small favours until the victim willingly commits a crime, however small. Now, the criminals will have something to use against the victim if the latter becomes

**“Ewa'a is responsible for providing care, safe shelter, health, and psychological care to victims of human trafficking and all forms of domestic violence**





UK National Crime Agency

*A notorious international drug kingpin arrested by UAE police*

non-cooperative; usually, threats are made that the victim would be exposed and arrested. The frightened victim has no option but to do as the criminal demands — and so the blackmail and exploitation properly begin.

These people are everywhere around us, in every country. The UAE, because of its prosperity and opportunities, attracts not only the best global talent but also quite a few criminals connected to international rackets. However, it's unwise of such characters to think that they can hide in the UAE and carry out their operations from here. This country has law enforcement agencies that are amongst the world's best and are well networked with their counterparts in other regions of the world. This collaboration results in some sensational arrests and gang busts from time to time.

On April 21, 2021, one of the UK's most-wanted fugitives was arrested in Dubai. He was a drug trafficker from Liverpool who had been on the run for eight years before being arrested. Officers from the UK National Crime Agency said that he had been using false identities after escaping a police raid on a café in Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, that was believed to be a front for a drug cartel.

In September 2020, Dubai Police arrested a leader of the "Kompania Bello", a transnational organised crime gang involved in drug trafficking operations between Latin America and Europe with

a value of €350 million (Dhs1.5 billion). As part of an international operation code-named 'Los Blancos', Dubai Police arrested the kingpin, who was wanted by the Italian authorities. The operation, which involved the anti-drug departments of 10 countries, resulted in apprehending 20 other wanted gang leaders in a synchronised series of international raids.

**FAKE JOBS SET THE TRAP**

The transnational criminal gangs involved in human trafficking entrap their victims usually with offers of decent, well-paying jobs in international locations. They

advertise fake jobs in local newspapers and on the Internet, or the criminals approach possible victims through social media.

The human trafficking gangs tend to target people from poor and developing countries, where the police and government response will be minimal if one of their citizens disappears. When the victims arrive at meeting points where they believe they'll be taken to their destination, they're kidnapped. In the cases of sexual exploitation, the trafficking gangs take the girls' passports, travel papers, and traffic them to illegal brothels where they are usually drugged and forced to work as prostitutes.

If the families of these victims report them missing to their countries' law enforcement, there's not much they can do, as the victims left home by their own free will. From the police perspective, they are young and maybe they just don't want to call their families, and there's no evidence to launch an investigation. So, the victims are lost until they can escape or are recovered by law enforcement agencies in the country where they're being forcibly held.

About this particular type of transnational crime, Ken Pennington, Retired Police Superintendent at the Police Services of Northern Ireland & Law Enforcement Consultant, said, "After 30 years in policing in Northern Ireland and across the world, I became very aware of the crime that is modern slavery and



*A leader of the transnational organised gang "Kompania Bello" involved in drug trafficking operations between Latin America and Europe*



**“When you see the effects it has on the victims and their families, you can only conclude that those behind such crimes have no human decency**



**KEN PENNINGTON**

Retired Police Superintendent of Police Services of Northern Ireland

human trafficking. That in itself is shocking, and when you see the effects it has on the victims and their families, you can only conclude that those behind such crimes have no human decency... In recent years, law enforcement internationally has taken the fight against the human trafficking gangs and there have been very positive results, but the war is far from over. It will take a lot more resources and cooperation to bring these criminals down, but we are heading in the right direction.”

**MONEY LAUNDERING**

The scale of transnational organised crime is staggering. In 2016, it was estimated to be worth \$3.6 trillion (Dhs13.212trn) up to \$4.8 trillion (Dhs1.6trn) a year and accounts for 7 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product, according to the Global Initiative, an independent civil-society organisation, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. With international law enforcement agencies actively targeting the profits from organised crime, it’s becoming more and more difficult for criminals to hide their money.

In June 2021, the UAE Central Bank issued new guidelines to help financial institutions to combat money laundering



and terrorism financing. The UAE already had very strict laws to deal with this and now the legal mechanism has been strengthened. A new agency has been set up specifically to identify money launderers and those suspected of financing terrorists and organised crime.

As per the UAE Ministry of Economy: “Money laundering is defined as any financial or banking transaction aimed at concealing or changing the identity of illegally obtained funds by passing them through the financial and banking system in order to make them appear as originating from legitimate sources, and then re-pumping and investing them in a legal manner contrary to their real nature.”

The effects of money laundering on a country’s economy, government, and social well-being include undermining the legitimate private sector; undermining the integrity of financial markets; loss of control over economic policy; economic distortion and instability; loss of revenue; and a national reputation risk.

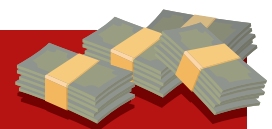
The social cost of money laundering includes allowing organised criminal groups to expand their operations and seize control of the economic power

from the regulated financial markets, the government, and the citizens. In extreme cases, money laundering can lead to a complete breakdown and takeover of a legitimate government.

Combating this crime is a complex and dynamic international issue. With modern technology and communications that know no boundaries, stopping the global flow of illegal money requires increased international cooperation.

The UAE sets an example for the world by handing out stiff punishment in money laundering cases. In July 2021, the Abu Dhabi Criminal Court sentenced a gang of nine to 10 years in jail for money laundering activities and for scamming Dhs18 million through fake cryptocurrency trading.

**WHAT IS MONEY LAUNDERING?**



**As per the UAE Ministry of Economy:** “Money laundering is defined as any financial or banking transaction aimed at concealing or changing the identity of illegally obtained funds by passing them through the financial and banking system in order to make them appear as originating from legitimate sources, and then re-pumping and investing them in a legal manner contrary to their real nature.”

**“The scale of transnational organised crime is staggering. In 2016, it was estimated to be worth \$3.6 trillion (Dhs13.212trn) up to \$4.8 trillion (Dhs1.6trn) a year and accounts for 7 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product**



**GLOBAL OPERATIONS**

In June 2020, the Federal Bureau of Investigations, United States, worked with UAE law enforcement agencies to locate and arrest an African social media scammer. This individual was arrested from Dubai with another man, a Mr Ponle, and both were extradited to the US and charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud and laundering hundreds of millions of dollars obtained from cybercrimes. Police recovered \$40 million (Dhs147mn) in cash, 13 luxury cars, 21 computers, 47 smartphones, and the addresses of nearly two million alleged victims from this one criminal operation alone.

The UAE Ministry of Economy’s Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) analyses suspicious transactions and activities that could involve money laundering, terrorism financing, and related criminal activities, by means of reports from financial institutions and designated non-financial businesses and professions (DNFBPs) that share knowledge to detect illegal activities. FIU encourages collaboration with local, regional and international partners.

The UAE FIU is part of the international network of FIUs, and the first Gulf entity to use the ‘goAML’ system, developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

(UNODC) to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The goAML system is an integrated system used by an FIU to receive, analyse, and distribute suspicious transaction reports in a fast and efficient manner.

With its enhanced security systems, a world-class police force and strong international relations with a multitude of law enforcement agencies, the UAE is one of the key players in the fight against transnational crime.

**YOU CAN HELP THE VICTIMS**

Citizens and residents should be aware that the crime of human trafficking exists everywhere, even in the UAE. If they spot the signs that someone could be a victim of human trafficking, they should report it to the police immediately. The main areas where the victims of human trafficking are identified are at travel terminals such as airports, bus stations, or ferry ports. But they could also be a worker that you see daily.

Human trafficking is often a crime that’s hidden in plain sight — the victims may be working at a shop you visit regularly or living in a house close to yours — so everyone needs to be aware of the warning signs. Some indications, especially in the case of women and children, that they may be a victim of human trafficking can include:

- *Appearing malnourished*
- *Showing signs of physical injuries and abuse*
- *Avoiding eye contact and social interaction*
- *Fear of government officials and police*
- *Only giving scripted or rehearsed answers to questions*
- *Being a stranger who has suddenly appeared in that area*
- *Lacking official identification documents*
- *Living at their place of employment or in crowded apartments or houses*
- *Not being allowed to go out in public alone*
- *or speak for themselves*
- *Frequenting hotels/motels with older males*
- *Showing signs of poor physical or dental health*
- *Tattoos or branding on the neck and or lower back to show they are owned by criminals*
- *Suffering from untreated sexually transmitted diseases*
- *Working in locations where security measures appear to be keeping people inside an establishment*

If you’re suspicious that someone is a victim of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, or domestic abuse within the UAE, you may call **800SAVE**, a dedicated Ewa’a hotline that facilitates the reporting of cases of human trafficking and enables victims to request protection.

You may also call the following numbers to report similar incidents: **+9712-2222000** (National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking) or **+9714-6082347** (Dubai Police-Control Centre of Human Trafficking).

By reporting such crimes as human trafficking, you could be helping to put a criminal behind bars and giving the victim their freedom back.

**ABOUT THE WRITER:** Orlando Wilson has worked in the security industry internationally for over 28 years. He is the chief consultant for Risks Inc. and based in Miami but spends much of his time travelling and providing a wide range of kidnapping prevention and tactical training services to private and government clients.