



I need help': Freed from Myanmar's scam centres, thousands are now stranded



swear to God I need help," said the man quietly on the other end of the line. The Ethiopian, who calls himself Mike, said he is being held with 450 others in a building inside Myanmar, along the country's border with Thailand.

scam compounds that have thrived on the border for years, in what appears to be the toughest action so far against the industry along the Thai-Myanmar border. But many of them are now stranded in Myanmar in makeshift camps because the process of assessing them and arranging flights back to their own countries is so slow. The armed militia groups who are holding them have a very limited capacity to support so many people – more than 7,000. One of them has said they have stopped freeing people from the compounds because they are not being moved to Thailand fast enough.

The understands that conditions in the camps are unsanitary, food barely sufficient, and many of the freed workers, like Mike, are in poor health. He is suffering from panic attacks, after working for a year in a scam centre where he was routinely beaten. Mike described being invited a year ago to take up what he was promised would be a good job, in Thailand, requiring only good English language and typing skills.

Instead he found himself subjected to a brutal regime, forced to work long hours every day to meet the target for defrauding people online set by his Chinese bosses. Mike is one of an estimated 100,000 people who are believed to have been lured to work in the scam operations along the Thai-Myanmar border, most of them run by Chinese fraud and gambling operatives who have taken advantage of the lawlessness in this part of Myanmar.

Despite horrifying accounts of abuse from those who escaped in the past, thousands still come from parts of the world where good jobs are scarce, enticed by promises of good money. The release of the scam workers started more than two weeks ago after Thailand, under pressure from China and some of its own politicians, cut power and telecommunications links to the compounds on the border.