



OUTCOME REPORT: REGIONAL MEETING ON COUNTERING PEOPLE SMUGGLING AND RELATED TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

27- 28 MAY 2025



REGIONAL SUPPORT OFFICE
THE BALI PROCESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

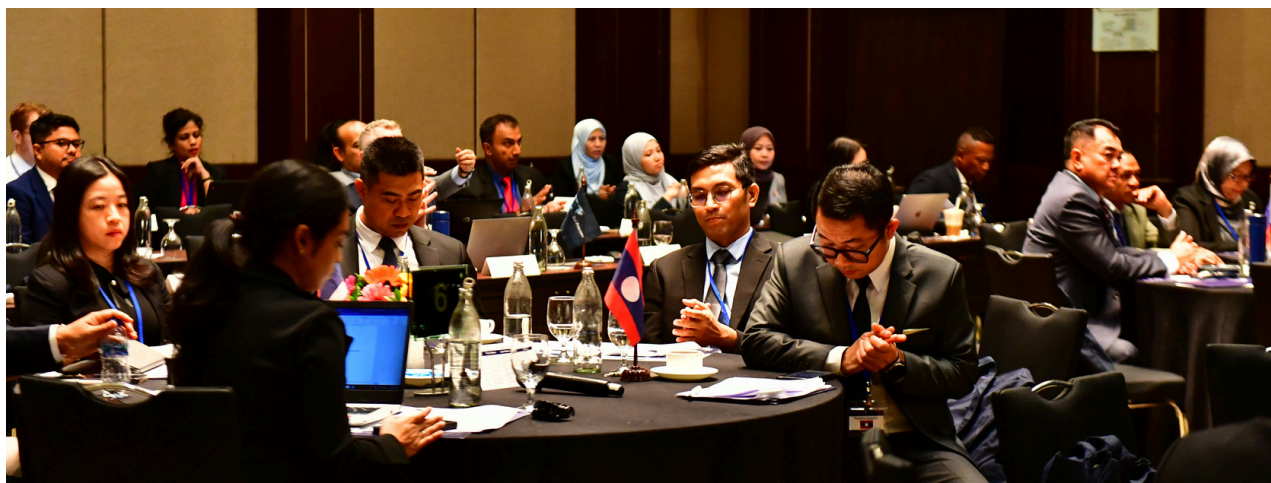
Between 27-28 May 2025, the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (RSO) in partnership with the Government of Malaysia convened a Regional Meeting on Countering People Smuggling and Related Transnational Crime.

The meeting was held in support of Malaysia's role as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s Voluntary Lead Shepherd for People Smuggling and in recognition of Malaysia's role as the 2025 ASEAN Chair.

The gathering brought together 40 senior delegates from 13 Bali Process Member States—Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam—to discuss the rising number of irregular maritime movements in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. In 2024, approximately 11,300 Rohingya refugees undertook irregular land and maritime journeys across the region. Of these, around 9,200 undertook dangerous journeys by sea or river, with 657 individuals reported dead or missing during such movements.

This meeting built upon the momentum of the RSO Roundtable on Combating Maritime People Smuggling in the Andaman Sea Region held on February 2024 in Bangkok, Thailand. Contributing to the 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation and RSO Work Plan 2024-2026, the regional meeting pursued three strategic objectives:

1. To identify challenges in countering people smuggling;
2. To share best practices in real-time information exchange, law enforcement coordination, and public communication; and
3. To foster regional cooperation across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Bali Process countries.



[1] <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/unhcr-regional-bureau-asia-and-pacific-rbap-rohingya-refugees-fleeing-over-land-and-sea-quarterly-update-31-december-2023>

Delegates welcomed the opportunity to engage in a non-binding and collaborative forum, allowing for open and constructive dialogue on complex issues surrounding people smuggling and related transnational crime. The discussions generated several key points and feedback:

Reflections

- **Understanding policy divergence and coordination mechanisms:** Delegates reflected on the different approaches countries have adopted in organising their national responses to people smuggling and trafficking in persons. These include how agencies coordinate, who is responsible for what actions, and how collaboration is structured. The meeting provided an opportunity to explore these differences—such as coordination through mechanisms like Liaison Officer Networks (involving the cross-posting of immigration and law enforcement officers between countries)—and to better understand how such approaches can assist in improving communication, aligning efforts, and supporting joint actions across borders.
- **Exchange of regional approaches and perspectives:** Delegates valued the opportunity to hear directly from subject matter experts and other Member States about their distinct approaches to countering people smuggling and trafficking in persons, including legal definitions, law enforcement strategies, and community engagement efforts. Group discussions provided an opportunity to exchange experiences and contribute towards practical ways to strengthen collaboration across the region.
- **Knowledge sharing and strategic foresight:** For many participants, the meeting served as a useful forum to gain insights into recent developments, policy initiatives, and operational responses undertaken by Bali Process Member States to address people smuggling, trafficking in persons, and related crimes. Delegates noted that learning about identified smuggling routes and emerging tactics supports strategic planning and preparedness for future responses.
- **Trust and relationship building:** The meeting reinforced the importance of building strong relationships across borders. Delegates acknowledged that both formal mechanisms and informal networks play a complementary role in fostering trust, enhancing mutual understanding, and enabling effective bilateral and multilateral cooperation.
- **Value of the Bali Process:** Several participants emphasised that the non-binding nature of the Bali Process creates a more open environment for honest conversations and promotes learning through candid exchange.

Challenges identified

Despite the strong commitment, delegates noted several ongoing constraints that continue to hinder effective responses:

- **Limited and inconsistent information sharing** across borders and agencies, due to the absence of formal mechanisms and protocols.
- **Insufficient operational coordination** between Member States and within national agencies results in fragmented and delayed responses.
- **Legal and procedural disparities** across Member States, particularly in the definition, investigation, and prosecution of people smuggling offences.
- **Capacity limitations**, especially among smaller or resource-constrained states, affect frontline detection, enforcement, and coordination.
- **Inadequate public awareness** enables smugglers to mislead individuals in vulnerable situations with false or misleading information.
- **Gaps in mechanisms to track illicit financial flows**, particularly those that operate across jurisdictions or rely on informal financial systems.

Recommendations for action

- **Enhance bilateral and multilateral coordination mechanisms:** Encourage Member States to establish or revitalise formal agreements such as MoUs and liaison arrangements to support timely communication, operational coordination, and cross-border cooperation.
- **Strengthen information and intelligence sharing:** Promote the use of practical and secure information-sharing arrangements between relevant agencies, including through designated focal points and regional networks, while ensuring respect for national sovereignty.
- **Enhance capacity building:** Provide targeted training and technical assistance to frontline officers and policymakers, particularly in areas such as digital investigations, financial crime detection, and victim-centred approaches.
- **Expand public awareness campaigns:** Support the design and delivery of locally adapted, evidence-based public information campaigns focused on communities at risk, using trusted messengers, appropriate languages, and culturally relevant communication channels.

The meeting reaffirmed the importance of trust-based, practical cooperation, and commitment to transforming dialogue into action, drawing on the collective effort of the Bali Process and Malaysia's leadership as ASEAN Voluntary Lead Shepherd for People Smuggling.

BACKGROUND

The Regional Meeting on Countering People Smuggling and Related Transnational Crime was convened on 27–28 May 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, against the backdrop of increasing irregular maritime movements in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. Organised by the RSO in partnership with the Government of Malaysia, the meeting served as a timely and critical platform for ASEAN Nations and Bali Process Member States to strengthen regional dialogue, promote practical cooperation, and explore concrete interventions to address the growing threat of people smuggling and related transnational crime.

The meeting aligned with Malaysia’s leadership as the 2025 ASEAN Chair and its longstanding role as Voluntary Lead Shepherd for People Smuggling under the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC). With the continued rise in maritime movements involving Rohingya refugees and other individuals in vulnerable situations—often driven by persecution and the absence of safe, regular migration pathways—the meeting underscored the urgency of developing a harmonised, forward-looking, and regionally coordinated response.

Delegates representing Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam brought expertise from a broad cross-section of regional institutions involved in border management, immigration enforcement, and policy coordination. The meeting featured a diverse array of speakers and panellists from international organisations, government agencies, civil society organisations, and academic institutions, offering expertise across migration management, law enforcement, and regional cooperation in addressing people smuggling.





The meeting adopted an interactive format that combined plenary presentations, panel discussions, country updates, and structured group discussions. Conducted under the Chatham House Rule, the sessions encouraged candid and constructive exchanges among participants.

The meeting pursued three primary objectives:

- 1. Identify challenges and opportunities** – Discuss key issues and challenges faced by Bali Process Member States in countering people smuggling and related transnational crimes, with a focus on actionable interventions and responses.
- 2. Promote best practices and information sharing** – Highlight effective strategies and explore mechanisms to facilitate real-time information sharing between Member States to disrupt people smuggling networks and associated criminal activities.
- 3. Engage in collaborative dialogue** – Facilitate open discussions among ASEAN and Bali Process Member States to enhance regional cooperation and build a more coordinated, collective response to maritime people smuggling.



KEY THEMES AND DISCUSSIONS

The meeting was opened by David Scott, RSO Co-Manager (Australia) and Datuk Makhzan bin Mahyuddin, Deputy Secretary General (Policy and Control), Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia. Datuk Makhzan underscored the importance of regional solidarity in tackling people smuggling.

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The transnational nature of people smuggling means no country can address this issue in isolation. It requires shared responsibility, stronger cross-border collaboration, timely information exchange, and a united front. As such, we must continue to strengthen our partnerships not only within ASEAN but also with our neighbours, Bali Process Member States, and relevant international stakeholders.

Datuk Makhzan bin Mahyuddin, Deputy Secretary General (Policy and Control), Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia

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Each session over the two-day meeting addressed a distinct thematic area relevant to countering people smuggling and related transnational crimes. Discussions began with an overview of people smuggling trends and the evolving situation in the Andaman Sea region, followed by a panel on countering mis- and dis-information in the context of irregular migration. Subsequent sessions explored strategies to strengthen regional cooperation and law enforcement responses, enhance cross-border information sharing, and disrupt the financial networks underpinning smuggling operations.

The importance of partnerships across government, academia, and the private sector was highlighted in a dedicated panel, while another session examined border security and operational responses to maritime smuggling. Delegates also participated in a group discussion focused on public awareness and strategic communication campaigns. A final panel addressed policy and legal frameworks, including alignment with international instruments such as the UN Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants. The meeting concluded with an overview and group discussion on the draft ASEAN Declaration on People Smuggling.

Country presentations from participating Member States enabled delegates to share national experiences, highlight progress made, and identify ongoing challenges in people smuggling and related transnational crimes.

KEY THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE MEETING

1. MARITIME SMUGGLING AND MIGRATION TRENDS

The keynote presentation outlined the increase in irregular maritime movements in Asia, with 2024 recorded as the deadliest year on record, with over 2,700 migrant deaths, primarily Rohingya and Afghan nationals. These movements are driven by persecution, economic desperation, and climate-induced displacement.

Delegates noted the lack of coordinated maritime responses and highlighted that women and children face heightened vulnerabilities during smuggling operations, including risks of abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

The 'panoramic approach' was introduced by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). [2]

2. REGIONAL DRIVERS AND OPERATIONAL COMPLEXITIES

Presentations highlighted the role of corruption, limited legal migration pathways, and rising demand for low-wage labour as key drivers of smuggling.

Joint research by the Mixed Migration Centre and the RSO revealed that many migrants deliberately choose smuggling networks due to the perceived inefficiency and high cost of regular migration.

The IOM's data showed that alternatives to detention programmes cost 80-90% less than traditional detention measures, and achieve higher voluntary return rates.

The emergence of 'secondary irregularity' was highlighted, whereby migrants travel legally from Bangladesh to Malaysia but subsequently attempt irregular onward movement to Australia, creating jurisdictional challenges for enforcement agencies across multiple transit points.

The situation in the region is further complicated by the presence of mixed migration flows—including refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants—requiring nuanced and protection-sensitive responses.

Smuggling modus operandi now includes layered transit routes, deployment of artificial intelligence for document fraud, and debt-based financing mechanisms that create additional vulnerabilities for exploitation throughout the migration journey.

3. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

A session on countering mis- and disinformation explored how false narratives can be weaponised by smugglers to recruit migrants. Joint research by the Mixed Migration Centre and the RSO revealed that one-third of irregular migrants did not seek any information prior to their journey, and those who did often received incomplete or misleading advice.

Panellists from the Malaysian Border Control and Protection Agency (MCBA) and UNHCR discussed information campaigns targeted at vulnerable communities, while a panellist representing TikTok shared examples of platform policies to prevent harmful content and promote verified migration information.

A focus group discussion allowed participants to share awareness raising campaign strategies within their respective countries. Australia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and the Philippines reported targeted messaging via social media, schools, and community radio, while Brunei and Cambodia noted challenges due to language diversity and misinformation.

Discussions reinforced the importance of trusted messengers, locally adapted content, and evaluation mechanisms to measure impact. Concerns were also raised around the effectiveness of campaigns when formal migration alternatives remain limited. This is particularly the case for Rohingya refugees moving across the region.

Australia spoke of a multi-layered evaluation framework for measuring information campaign effectiveness, incorporating fortnightly sentiment analysis reporting, digital engagement analytics (click-through rates, time spent on content, engagement rates), community-level surveys conducted through IOM partnerships in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia to monitor rumours and trending topics, and systematic open-source research to track narrative evolution. This methodology moves beyond traditional reach metrics to assess behavioural impact and community-level awareness changes in target populations.

4. LAW ENFORCEMENT AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

A speaker from the Australian Border Force (ABF) shared insights on strategic communications to counter people smuggling, highlighting the challenges of developing effective counter-messaging themes, the importance of collaboration with partners to deliver these messages, and the role of community outreach in shaping safer migration narratives.

Malaysia's newly established border agency, the Malaysia Control and Border Protection Agency (MCBA), was noted for integrating six national agencies to streamline border control, disrupt document fraud, and coordinate border surveillance.

A speaker from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) presented the RCMP Migrant Smuggling Prevention Strategy, emphasising proactive engagement with regional counterparts and information exchange through the network of liaison officers. The speaker highlighted cases where Canadian citizens have been found financing fraudulent passports for Sri Lankan nationals being smuggled to Europe via Malaysia, highlighting the need for enhanced cooperation between agencies on financial intelligence, both at a national and regional/global level.

Joint investigations and case studies from Sri Lanka and Indonesia illustrated how operational outcomes can be improved through trust-based cooperation and intelligence exchange.

5. FINANCIAL FLOWS AND SMUGGLING SYNDICATES

The Financial Intelligence and Enforcement Department (FIED) of the Central Bank of Malaysia presented findings from a 2023 National Risk Assessment, which identified trafficking in persons and people smuggling as medium-high risk crimes. The assessment highlighted that business entities employing irregular workers were often implicated in suspicious financial transactions.

The speaker underscored the importance of strengthening collaboration between financial intelligence units, law enforcement agencies, and private financial institutions to more effectively detect and disrupt illicit financial flows. Recommendations included the development of red flag indicators and the monitoring of cash-based transactions and mule account transfers.

The speaker also emphasised the need for enhanced regional cooperation to better track and disrupt the financial mechanisms underpinning transnational crimes such as people smuggling. Closer cross-border collaboration, information sharing, and joint financial investigations were highlighted as critical tools in targeting and dismantling the financial infrastructure of smuggling syndicates operating across Southeast Asia.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

The session on legal frameworks highlighted that in some jurisdictions, national laws contain inconsistencies or are not fully aligned with the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, posing challenges for effective cross-border cooperation and prosecution.

There was consensus on the need for common definitions, especially to distinguish between trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, and between criminal perpetrators and victims. Examples from the Philippines and Viet Nam illustrated the practical implementation of departure screening protocols and visa control mechanisms.

A panellist from Sunway University Malaysia encouraged Member States to strengthen whistleblower protections and formalise information-sharing agreements.

7. DRAFT ASEAN DECLARATION ON COUNTERING PEOPLE SMUGGLING

A dedicated session, led by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) Malaysia, presented the key principles of the draft ASEAN Declaration on People Smuggling. The Declaration—currently under review by ASEAN Member States—aims to reinforce regional commitments by aligning with existing international standards. The Declaration will mark a significant step toward a more coordinated and principles-based regional response to people smuggling.

Participants were divided into groups for discussion and feedback, focusing on regional cooperation, capacity building, monitoring progress and measuring impact as well as early actions to operationalise the draft declaration. Key recommendations from groups included:

- The development of real-time information-sharing arrangements between Member States through a formal charter or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU); supported by the appointment of a focal point from each Member State to facilitate information exchange.
- Incorporation of whole-of-society approaches, including civil society and private sector engagement.
- Strengthening capacity building efforts, particularly in technological skills, technical expertise, and addressing language barriers.

MOHA acknowledged the valuable input and noted that feedback will be compiled and presented to ASEAN Member States for their consideration as the work towards the finalisation of the Declaration continues.

8. COUNTRY PRESENTATIONS

Through country presentations, delegates heard from their peers on national developments, challenges, and future priorities related to countering people smuggling and related transnational crime. Common themes included:

- **Persistent cross-border coordination challenges**, particularly in monitoring irregular movements along land and maritime routes.
- **The increasing link between online scams and labour trafficking** underscoring the need for integrated responses to emerging forms of exploitation.
- **Growing recognition of the need to leverage technology and big data analytics** to enhance border surveillance and detect smuggling activities more effectively.
- **Ongoing efforts in several countries** to update or harmonise domestic legislation with international standards.
- **Identified need for sustained technical assistance**, specialised training, and the establishment of multilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to support operational cooperation and legal alignment across borders.



ACHIEVEMENTS AGAINST MEETING OBJECTIVES

The Regional Meeting supported progress against the following strategic objectives:

- 1. Identifying challenges and opportunities:** Delegates recognised persistent gaps in legal alignment, operational coordination, and information-sharing mechanisms that hinder effective responses to people smuggling. At the same time, the meeting underscored opportunities to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation, enhance people smuggling responses, and pursue harmonisation of legal and policy frameworks with international best practices.
- 2. Promoting best practices and information sharing:** Through country presentations and thematic panels, participants exchanged practical approaches to strengthen law enforcement coordination, disrupt financial flows, and counter mis/disinformation. Member States also shared strategies for delivering public awareness campaigns and explored mechanisms for real-time information exchange to support operational responses.
- 3. Engaging in collaborative dialogue:** The meeting reaffirmed the importance of trust-based relationships and inclusive dialogue. Delegates used the platform to strengthen networks across ASEAN and Bali Process Member States and expressed a shared commitment to deepen cooperation with regional partners. This collaborative spirit was recognised as central to building a more coordinated and forward-looking response to people smuggling.

Collectively, these outcomes demonstrated strong regional commitment to moving from discussion to practical action and provided a solid foundation for follow-up across future activities.



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

To sustain momentum and support the operationalisation of the meeting's key outcomes, the RSO will take forward the next steps through the 2024–2026 Work Plan, which provides the framework for delivering initiatives that strengthen regional cooperation, enhance information sharing, and build Member State capacity.

- **Advance regional network initiatives such as the Regional Information, Liaison and Outreach Network (RILON) Initiative and the Six Country Irregular Migration (SCIM) Initiative.** These initiatives will bring together key focal points from relevant law enforcement, border, immigration, and maritime agencies from selected Bali Process Member States. Focal points—seconded to the RSO in Bangkok—will serve as national connectors, facilitating access across domestic agencies, enabling real-time engagement, and collecting insights on emerging trends, operational developments, and policy priorities. Their contributions will inform evidence-based discussions and support the development of coordinated responses that are grounded in regional realities.
- **Support Member States through capacity building and policy dialogue. The RSO will deliver targeted training initiatives, including the Introduction to Countering People Smuggling Course and the International People Smuggling Investigations Program (IPSIP).** These programmes will engage officials from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam with a particular focus on strengthening investigative capacity among frontline law enforcement officers and practitioners. The training will also aim to enhance participants' ability to identify and disrupt people smuggling groups, improve cross-border information sharing, and apply practical investigative tools in line with international good practices.



- **Undertake research on navigating mis/disinformation.** A study will be conducted to better understand how misinformation and disinformation influence irregular maritime movements across the Andaman Sea, with a particular focus on the perspectives of origin and host communities in the region. It aims to understand how false narratives influence migration decisions, public perception, and policy responses, while also identifying key actors and information pathways. The study will assess the information needs and trust dynamics of at-risk communities and offer actionable, evidence-based recommendations to Bali Process Member States and other relevant stakeholders. The research will support more informed, coordinated, and protection-sensitive regional responses, leveraging emerging technologies and community-based strategies to counter harmful narratives, strengthen public awareness, and enhance maritime security.
- **Foster dialogue and practical cooperation on the perceptions and information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration.** Leveraging on RSO's report, '*Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration: Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand*', dialogues will be initiated in these target countries to bring together relevant government agencies to enhance their knowledge and understanding of migration realities in South and Southeast Asia at national and regional levels. This report highlights the key drivers of irregular migration in South and Southeast Asia, the perceptions of persons at risk of irregular migration, their origin communities, and their host communities of irregular migration, as well as their information needs. This knowledge provides for the design and delivery of locally adapted, evidence-based public information campaigns focused on communities at risk of irregular migration and people smuggling.
- **Strengthen the capacity to develop strong, clear public messaging.** In an effort to strengthen the capacity of Bali Process Member States to develop strong, clear public messaging to respond to irregular migration and prevent loss of life during dangerous migration journeys, the existing *Bali Process Handbook on Addressing Irregular Migration through Effective Information Campaigns* (Handbook) will be refreshed. This existing Handbook was published in 2015. The Handbook is intended to guide Bali Process Member States through the development, dissemination, and monitoring of the impact of public messaging to address irregular migration. The Handbook will be updated to encourage behaviour change in persons at risk of irregular migration. A *Regional Consultation brought together selected Bali Process Members and Observers* to gather their input and ideas to inform the refresh of the Handbook.

CLOSING

The Regional Meeting concluded with a strong sense of purpose and a clear recognition that meaningful progress depends on sustained cooperation, timely information sharing, and trust-based relationships among Member States. The discussions reinforced the urgency of translating dialogue into practical action, strengthening partnerships among ASEAN, Bali Process Member States, and other relevant stakeholders.

The RSO wishes to acknowledge with appreciation the support rendered by the Government of Malaysia, both in its role as the ASEAN Voluntary Lead Shepherd for People Smuggling and in facilitating the successful delivery of this Regional Meeting. Malaysia's leadership has been pivotal in advancing regional cooperation and fostering collective action against people smuggling.



GLOSSARY

ABF	Australian Border Force
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
FIED	Financial Intelligence and Enforcement Department (Central Bank of Malaysia)
IPSIP	International People Smuggling Investigations Program
MCBA	Malaysian Border Control and Protection Agency
MOHA	Ministry of Home Affairs, Malaysia
MOUs	Memorandums of Understanding
RILON	Regional Information, Liaison and Outreach Network Initiative
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RSO	Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime
SCIM	Six Country Irregular Migration Initiative
SOMTC	ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime
IOM	International Organization for Migration
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency



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