

WHY PEOPLE MIGRATE · EPISODE SIX

HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

A second-generation
criminal technology.
It does not need chains.
It has other names.

EVERY NUMBER HAS A FACE

WHAT YOU WILL READ.

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THE OFFER.

It begins with a message on a phone. A poster on a wall. A bus ticket. A border fence. A ledger of debts in another currency. A dormitory with a single latch.

Twenty-first-century human trafficking does not arrive in chains. It arrives with a **LinkedIn job offer**. With an overseas post. With a fiancé who appeared on a dating app. With a contract nobody can read because nobody translated it. With a passport the employer kept "for safekeeping".

Which is why the easiest analogy — "twenty-first-century slavery" — is also the most misleading. Nineteenth-century slavery needed the whip to function. The twenty-first-century version needs a form.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This episode deliberately avoids the term "modern slavery" as a synonym for human trafficking. Not because the comparison is unworthy — but because it drags the reader into the past when the architecture of the crime is, above all, **contemporary, digital and legally ambiguous**.

Contemporary trafficking is not a survival of Atlantic slavery. It is an adaptive industry.

— EDITORIAL THESIS • KIN N°06

THE THESIS

It does not need
chains —
it has kafala.
It does not need cellars —
it has LinkedIn offers.
It does not need brutality
—
it has vitiated consent.

THE CRIME IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK.

The most familiar image of human trafficking still lives in the Atlantic. Chains. Cellars. A plundered Africa. A continent under the lash. It is a true image — for the nineteenth century.

In today's data, it misses the mark. According to the International Labour Organization, **55% of forced labour worldwide is in Asia-Pacific**. Not Africa. Not the Americas. Asia — home also to the main cyber-fraud compounds that today employ **hundreds of thousands of people against their will**.

Africa leads another statistic: that of forced marriage. The Americas concentrate most of the organ trafficking cases detected by UNODC. The Persian Gulf built legal structures that can facilitate labour-trafficking situations. And the United States — on page 18 of this episode — figured out how to use its own federal visa programme to manufacture servitude.

There is no single map. There is an **infrastructure**.

RUPTURE • ILO 2022

55%

OF FORCED LABOUR WORLDWIDE
IS IN ASIA-PACIFIC

The image most people
still carry
is out of date.

— ROUTES OF CAPTURE • SHOT 32

II WHAT PALERMO SAYS.

In November 2000, the UN adopted in Palermo the protocol that still defines human trafficking in law. The definition has three elements — and all three must be present.

01 · ACTION

**RECRUIT.
TRANSPORT.
HARBOUR.**

No border crossing required. 58% of detected victims are trafficked within their own country.

02 · MEANS

**FORCE.
FRAUD.
COERCION.**

Includes abuse of vulnerability and **vitiated consent**. A "yes" given under unpayable debt is not a yes.

03 · PURPOSE

**EXPLOITATION.
SEXUAL. LABOUR.
ORGANS. CRIME.**

Forced criminality entered the vocabulary — it is what happens in Southeast Asian scam compounds.

COUNTER-TEST · WHAT TRAFFICKING IS NOT

SMUGGLING IS NOT TRAFFICKING.

Migrant smuggling without subsequent exploitation is not trafficking. Self-organised irregular migration is not trafficking. Precarious labour without coercion is not trafficking. Conflating smuggling with trafficking is the most common journalistic error — and the most politically convenient one, because it turns a victim into an offender.

The simple rule: **smuggling is a crime against the border; trafficking is a crime against the person**. The first ends when the migrant reaches the destination. The second begins when the migrant reaches it.

THE KEY TEST · THE THREE AT ONCE

ALL THREE MUST BE THERE.

Palermo is not a menu. For the crime to exist in law, **action + means + purpose must overlap**. Recruiting someone by fraud for forced labour: trafficking. Recruiting without fraud and without exploitative purpose: employment. Recruiting by fraud, but for legitimate work: a labour violation.

Critical exception: when the victim is a child, the means element drops out of the test. Action and exploitative purpose are enough. A child cannot consent to their own trafficking.

III THE SCALE.

The numbers that follow are conservative. They are the visible slice. The surface of what international agencies manage to count. Beneath each of them lies a larger number — invisible by construction.

50_M

PEOPLE IN MODERN SLAVERY WORLDWIDE •
ILO / WALK FREE • 2022

27,6_M

IN FORCED LABOUR, STRICTO SENSU • ILO •
2022

236_{BI}

DOLLARS • ANNUAL ILLEGAL PROFIT OF THE
INDUSTRY • ILO • 2024

+25%

DETECTED VICTIMS 2022 VS. 2019 • UNODC
• 2024

38%

OF DETECTED VICTIMS ARE CHILDREN •
UNODC • 2024

58%

TRAFFICKED WITHIN THEIR OWN COUNTRY •
UNODC • 2024

WHERE IT LEAVES

Vulnerability is not a mystery. It has an address.

Where the State does not reach — because it was dismantled, captured or never there —, the crime does. Not with cinematic brutality: with an **offer**. A job in a wealthier neighbouring country. A marriage to someone with a passport. A crossing to be paid for later.

IV THE TECHNOLOGIES.

Five contemporary architectures account for most of human trafficking in the world today. None of them relies on spectacular violence. All of them rely on an administrative mechanism that looks legal.

01

KAFALA.

The visa belongs to the employer. If you leave, you disappear.

02

SCAM CENTERS.

Compounds in the jungle. You apply for a call-centre job. You wake up in captivity.

03

ORGANS.

A clandestine market of US\$ 840M to US\$ 1.7bn a year.

04

ADOPTIONS.

40,000 suspect adoptions in Guatemala between 1968 and 2008.

05

CORRIDORS.

Sahel · Central Mediterranean · Darién. Routes that charge a toll.

Each of these architectures exploits an institutional loophole.
None of them needs to break the law — some of them **are** the law.

KAFALA.

The legal system that binds, by law, the worker's migration status to the employer. Established by the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Without written authorisation from the employer, the worker cannot change jobs, leave the country or go home.



AI IMAGE

It is the most efficient legal expression of contemporary labour trafficking — because it does not need to hide. The Filipino or Nepali worker recruited for a Qatari construction site signs, upon accepting the job, a contract in which their passport is surrendered "for safekeeping". The debt to the recruiter — often three to five times their salary — is deducted at destination.

If the job is not what was promised, they cannot leave. If wages go unpaid, they cannot complain. If they complain, the employer cancels the visa — and they fall into irregular migration status in the country they entered legally.

Whoever holds the key
controls the body.

SOURCES · AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2016-2022
· ITUC · MIGRANT-RIGHTS.ORG

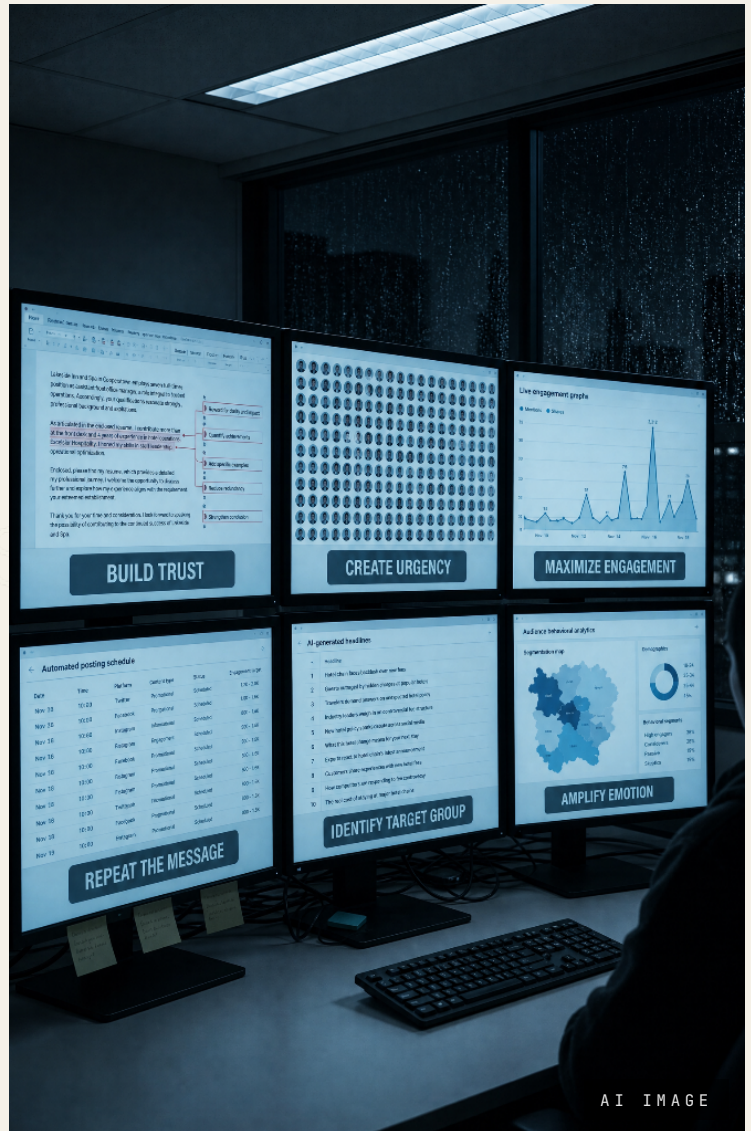
SCAM CENTERS.

The newest statistical anomaly in human trafficking: an architecture in which the victim is forced to commit the crime. The worker is abducted to **defraud third parties** — victim of trafficking and agent of fraud simultaneously.

The pattern is the same in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and in Southeast Asia's border Special Economic Zones: a LinkedIn or Telegram ad promises a customer-service job, with expat wages, in Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur.

The applicant flies. They are met by "recruiters". They are driven, for 8 to 12 hours, to a fenced **compound** — usually on the Thailand–Myanmar border or in the interior of Cambodia. Passport confiscated. Phone confiscated. Debt imposed.

From there, they run pig butchering — long-con scams targeting Western victims who believe they have met someone online. Each operator has a daily quota. Missing the quota means a beating — or resale to another compound.



It is the only category of trafficking where the victim can be arrested before being recognised as a victim.

— KIN LEXICON · FORCED CRIMINALITY

WHAT SITS ON THE EDGES.

03 · ORGANS

THE INVISIBLE MARKET.

Estimated between US\$ 840 million and US\$ 1.7 billion a year. Between 5% and 10% of all transplants worldwide are reported to originate in the illegal market (WHO 2007, revised by UNODC 2024).

It is not abduction for organs — a category more mythic than real. It is **induced consent**: people in extreme poverty selling kidneys for US\$ 3,000, resold for US\$ 200,000 at destination.

5-10%

OF GLOBAL TRANSPLANTS ·
BLACK MARKET · UNODC
2024

04 · ADOPTIONS

THE CRIME THAT SIGNS PAPER.

Fraudulent international adoptions — the only kind of trafficking that produces its own notarial record. Guatemala is the paradigmatic case: **40,000 suspect adoptions between 1968 and 2008**, average cost US\$ 45,000 per child. Many mothers subsequently stated that they had never consented.

The pattern repeats in Ethiopia, Vietnam, Congo, Ukraine. A system in which legal documents seal a crime against a child's origin.

40,000

SUSPECT ADOPTIONS ·
GUATEMALA · 1968-2008

05 · CORRIDORS

THE ROUTE THAT CHARGES.

Where the State does not go, the toll does. The Saharan corridor (Niger → Libya → Mediterranean) and the Darién corridor (Colombia → Panama) operate on the same logic: an armed group charges per metre of crossing.

When the migrant cannot pay, the armed groups extract the value by other means: forced labour at destination, sexual servitude, or holding a family member as collateral. It is at this point that transport ceases to be smuggling and comes to meet the three Palermo elements.

125\$

PROFIT PER MIGRANT ·
CLAN DEL GOLFO · DARIÉN
· COLOMBIA MIN. OF
DEFENCE

V WHO RUNS IT — GLOBAL SOUTH.

It is not a single mafia. It is 821 networks, with members of 112 nationalities, operating in the European Union alone (Europol, 2024). Contemporary trafficking is not commanded — it is franchised.

Each network runs one segment: recruitment, transport, border, exploitation at destination, financial laundering. The victim passes through three to five distinct organisations during a single journey. None of them knows the next. That opacity is what blocks criminal prosecution — and it is also what characterises the crime as a **second-generation technology**: modular, adaptive, with no visible centre.

In the Global South, three actors concentrate the bulk of recent investigative literature:

CLAN DEL GOLFO.

COLOMBIA • DARIÉN CORRIDOR

Colombia's largest cartel. Controls every metre of the Colombian side of the Darién. Local coyotes pay a franchise fee. Estimated profit: US\$ 125 per migrant in transit.

SOURCE • COLOMBIA MIN. OF DEFENCE • KIN 2026

ALBANIAN NETWORKS.

BALKANS → WESTERN EU

The most active single-nationality group in sex trafficking in Western Europe, per Europol 2024. The journalistic term "Albanian mafia" is imprecise: these are networks with predominantly Albanian members.

SOURCE • EUROPOL SOCTA 2024

'NDRANGHETA + PCC.

ITALY ↔ BRAZIL

A consolidated cocaine partnership. Human trafficking is inferential: the same logistical corridors and laundering structures serve both flows. There is no direct evidence yet of human trafficking operated by the pair.

SOURCE • INSIGHT CRIME • DIA ITALY

EUROPOL • SOCTA
2024

821 112

ACTIVE
NETWORKS
IN THE
EU

NATIONALITIES
INVOLVED

WHERE THE CRIME HAPPENS.

CORRIDOR 01

SAHEL → LIBYA → CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN.

From Niger, Sudan and Nigeria through Libya. Documented by IOM: slave market systems in Tripoli and Bani Walid, family ransoms by phone, labour and sexual exploitation before boarding inflatable dinghies.

CORRIDOR 02

IRAQ → SYRIA.

Under the Islamic State (2014–2019), Yazidi women and girls were sold in slave markets with documents, contracts and proofs of ownership. The most documented case of sexual slavery of the twenty-first century. The 2018 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nadia Murad and Denis Mukwege.

CORRIDOR 03

SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA.

Forced labour on Thai fishing vessels, domestic servitude in Malaysia, forced marriage of Rohingya refugees, and the new cross-border scam-center cross-border scam centers in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.

CORRIDOR 04

ARAB GULF.

The kafala system remains in force across the six GCC states. South Asian and East African workers in formal legal servitude — not clandestine. The 2022 Qatar World Cup made public what labour organisations had been reporting for decades.

THE DARIÉN.

Between Colombia and Panama lies a strip of forest that no road crosses. In 2023, five hundred and twenty thousand people crossings were recorded on foot. The trees were marked with strips of coloured plastic — an improvised alphabet for those who came after.

520,000

CROSSINGS • 2023 •
MIGRACIÓN PANAMÁ

22%

CHILDREN IN THE 2023
FLOW

676

SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL
VIOLENCE • MSF • 2023

98%.

In 2024, the new Panamanian president, under United States pressure, promised to shut the Darién. Barbed-wire fences were installed at the key jungle passes. The statistical result was immediate.

"The Darién was hell. But it was a mapped hell. What governments did was not solve the crisis; they only pushed the death to places where satellites and journalists cannot see."

— HÉCTOR PEREZ • KIN 2026

INTERVIEW

HÉCTOR PEREZ.

53 YEARS OLD • JOURNALIST • REFUGEE • PANAMA

Perez has documented the Darién since 2022. In this edition, he speaks to KIN about the 98% statistical drop in the first quarter of 2025 — and about what that drop does not tell.

98%

DROP IN CROSSINGS • 1ST QUARTER
2025 • MIGRACIÓN PANAMÁ / DHS

THE DAM EFFECT.

The 98% drop in Darién crossings was celebrated as a victory. In the May 2025 Department of Homeland Security report, the number appeared next to the word secured. In an official photograph, the Panamanian minister shook hands with a U.S. official in front of a newly installed barbed-wire fence.

What the photograph does not show is that **the crime did not disappear — it only shifted route**. Héctor Perez describes the phenomenon in three movements observable since mid-2025:

HÉCTOR'S THESIS

The statistical drop is real. The tragedy continues — in another geography, darker, uncovered by journalism.



MOVEMENT 01

REVERSE FLOW.

Venezuelans trying to return. They discover the return is as lethal as the departure. Without regularised status, without valid documents, without an economy capable of receiving them.

MOVEMENT 02

MARITIME ROUTES.

Caribbean and Pacific, bypassing Panama. Improvised boats, multi-day open-sea journeys. Shipwrecks unrecorded.

MOVEMENT 03

THE CRIME REDIRECTS.

Recruitment networks move to Guyana, Suriname and northern Colombia. The Clan del Golfo's franchise model adapts to the new map within weeks.

Closing a route does not destroy the market.
It moves the market into the dark.

— THESIS · KIN N6

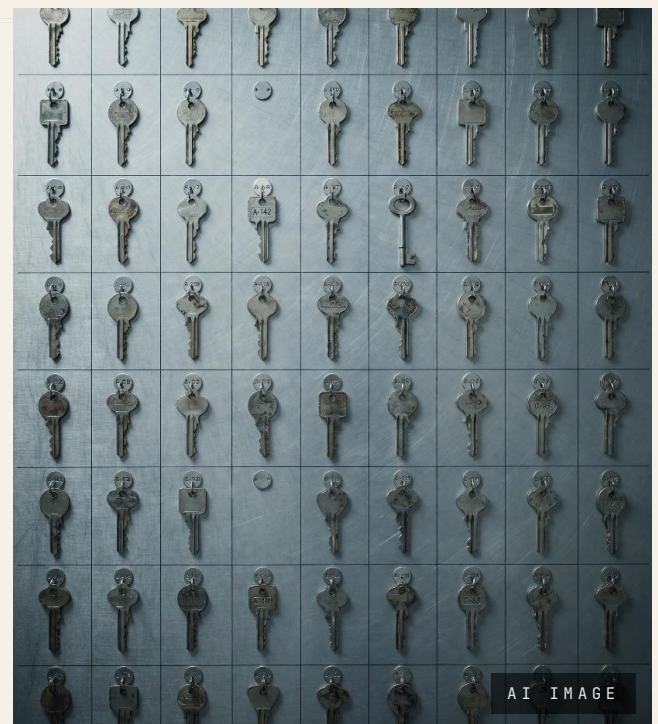
VII WHO RUNS IT — GLOBAL NORTH.

The United States sit in the Tier 1 category of the State Department's own TIP Report — the tier for countries "in full compliance" with the minimum anti-trafficking standards. In the same country, the Department of Justice itself described, in November 2021, an operation on Georgia farms as "modern-day slavery".

The contradiction is not ideological: it is **architectural**. Labour trafficking in the U.S. does not operate at the margin of the legal system — it operates through it. The federal temporary-visa programmes H-2A (agriculture) and H-2B (non-agricultural sectors) tie, by law, the worker to the employer who sponsored the visa. It is the same structural logic as the Gulf's kafala, under different names.

If the worker complains, the employer cancels the sponsorship. If the visa is cancelled, the worker falls into irregular migration status — and starts to fear reporting anything. A 2023 Department of Labor inspection found **labour violations in 90% of the agricultural sites visited in the U.S. Southeast**.

The pages that follow document cases investigated, adjudicated or widely recorded by authorities and by workers' rights organisations.



Each key, a number.
Each number, a body.

In the U.S., the key is called H-2A.

— SYNTHESIS • CH. VII

THE AMERICAN FIELD

A trailer.
A padlocked fence.
A hat. A bucket.
A ledger of debts.

This is the physical architecture of labour trafficking inside the United States. It is not clandestine. It is invisible by zip code — in the counties without an inspector, in the contracts without a translator, in the housing without an address.

OPERATION BLOOMING ONION.

The investigation began in 2016, following a report by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Five years later, in November 2021, more than two hundred federal agents executed twenty search warrants across southern Georgia. Twenty-four people were indicted.

The organisation's leader, Maria Leticia Patricio, a U.S. citizen, controlled ten companies that had filed **71,000 H-2A visa applications** to the federal government. Under those visas, workers from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico were brought to the Vidalia onion fields of southern Georgia. At destination:

- Passports confiscated on arrival.
- Work at US\$ 0.20 per bucket of onions pulled by hand.
- Housing in mobile homes surrounded by electric fencing.
- Threats with firearms. One documented rape. Five kidnappings.
- Thirty workers **sold** to an Indiana contractor for US\$ 21,481.
- Two deaths from working conditions.

The network's estimated profit between 2015 and 2021 was **US\$ 200 million**. Laundering ran through casinos, real estate and cashier's checks. Employees of the Georgia Department of Labor allegedly received bribes to approve the substandard housing.

DOCUMENTED SCALE

71,000

H-2A VISA APPLICATIONS FILED
BY THE PATRICIO TCO

200_{MI}

DOLLARS • ORGANISATION'S
ESTIMATED PROFIT • 2015-2021

100₊

VICTIMS FREED

SENTENCES

Javier Sanchez Mendoza Jr.: 30 years in federal prison.

Aurelio Medina: 64 months.

Maria Leticia Patricio: plea agreement for conspiracy to commit mail fraud, July 2024.

"Modern-day slavery."

It was the U.S. Attorney himself who chose the term this episode proposes to abandon.

— U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE • SD GEORGIA • 22 NOV 2021

SIGNAL INTERNATIONAL.

After Hurricane Katrina, a marine-construction company headquartered in Mobile, Alabama, needed to rebuild offshore platforms. Rather than hiring locally, recruited **around 500 skilled workers in India** — welders, fitters, pipefitters — under promise of permanent green cards and fair wages.

Each worker paid between US\$ 10,000 and US\$ 20,000 in recruitment fees before boarding the plane. They arrived in the U.S. already in debt.

On landing in Orange, Texas, and Pascagoula, Mississippi, they were taken to camps guarded 24 hours a day. **Twenty-four men shared the space of a double-wide trailer.** Guards called them by number, not by name. Body searches on entry and exit. No visitors. No alcohol. And from each salary, Signal deducted **US\$ 1,050 per month** as "rent".

The company is estimated to have saved **US\$ 8 million in labour costs** through the scheme.

FEBRUARY 2015

14.1_M

DOLLARS IN DAMAGES SET BY A
FEDERAL JURY FOR 5 WORKERS •
DAVID V. SIGNAL INTERNATIONAL

20_M

DOLLARS IN ADDITIONAL SETTLEMENT
• JULY 2015

On 12 July 2015, with 11 pending suits involving another 227 workers, Signal International filed for **Chapter 11 bankruptcy**. The workers' defence was led by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the American Civil Liberties Union.

In the State Department's TIP Report, the United States remained classified as Tier 1.

ALL DOCUMENTED. NOT ALL PUNISHED.

THE PATTERN REPEATS.

HAWAII • 2010

GLOBAL HORIZONS.

More than **400 Thai workers** trafficked via H-2A. Unpayable recruitment fees, confiscated passports, housing with dozens per home. Federal indictment in 2010 — the largest case DOJ had ever brought to date. The federal criminal charges were dropped in 2012. Civil suits continued.

PARTIAL CIVIL JUSTICE • CRIMINAL CASE FAILED

CALIFORNIA • 1995

EL MONTE THAI.

Seventy-two Thai women discovered in a compound surrounded by barbed wire in El Monte, sewing clothes for major brands. Some were held there for up to **seven years**. The case is regarded as the founding milestone of the 2000 TVPA.

LEGISLATIVE MILESTONE • TVPA 2000

5 STATES • 2022 SENTENCE

LOS VILLATOROS / MORENO.

Bladimir Moreno, owner of Los Villatoros Harvesting, ran a RICO scheme between 2015 and 2017 across Florida, Kentucky, Indiana, Georgia and North Carolina. Sentence: **118 months of federal prison** plus US\$ 175K in restitution. The RICO statute — the same one used against mafias — was applied to H-2A visa abuse.

SENTENCE: 118 MONTHS • RICO

FLORIDA • 2002

RAMOS BROTHERS.

Immokalee, Florida. Ramiro, Juan and José Luis Ramos — tomato-farm subcontractors — held Mexican and Central American workers in involuntary servitude. **10 to 12 years of prison** each. Founding case of the Campaign for Fair Food.

SENTENCE: 10 TO 12 YEARS

AMERICAN SAMOA • 2001

U.S. V. KIL SOO LEE.

Daewoosa textile factory. Workers from Vietnam and China paid US\$ 3,600 to US\$ 13,000 to be hired — and had their passports confiscated. Punishment for complaining: beatings, starvation, deportation. On back-pay day, Lee forced workers to endorse cheques into his own account.

U.S. TERRITORIES • ZONE OF AMBIGUITY

HAWAII FISHING • 2016

THE LEGAL LOOPHOLE.

An Associated Press investigation: federal exemptions for fishing of "highly migratory species" outside the Exclusive Economic Zone allow hundreds of foreign workers to live **years on board** without leaving the boat. Wage: **US\$ 0.70 per hour**. The fish are bought by Whole Foods, Costco and Sam's Club.

IT IS NOT ILLEGAL. THE SYSTEM WAS STRUCTURED THIS WAY.

VIII

THE MISSING REGISTER.

Some states appear at the top of trafficking rankings because they count better. Others barely appear because they do not count. Neither group is telling the truth about reality.

What international reports call "detected trafficking" is, in fact, a measure of the detection apparatus. Where police and prosecutorial records are cross-referenced, where DNA databases for missing persons exist, and where child-protection authorities report to a central body, the number rises. Where the State is fragile, captured or uninterested, the number disappears.

That is why **Haiti, Myanmar, Iraq, Nigeria and Brazil** occupy different positions in the same phenomenon: each of them records only a fraction of what happens on its territory. Under-reporting is a symptom, not an index.

There is no editorial justice in singling out one country at the top. The absence of records is itself a technology — the infrastructure of invisibility. Without integrated databases, without mandatory cooperation, without forensic identification systems, the crime does not appear in the statistics.

What appears is what was counted. And what was counted does not correspond to what actually happened.

KIN'S NOTE

In this episode we chose to **not rank countries declared volume**. Alongside strong data from UNODC, ILO and Europol, we list regions and cases with the strongest documentary base — not with the loudest sense of scandal.

Under-reporting
is a symptom.
Not an index.

— KIN METHOD

THE ABSENCE OF DATA
IS NEVER ABSENCE OF CRIME.
IT IS ABSENCE OF APPARATUS.
IT IS ABSENCE OF WILL.

VOICE FROM THE FIELD.

SOURCE AND VERIFICATION NOTES

WHOM THESE STORIES BELONG TO.

The three stories that follow belong to the three people who lived them. No organisation — nor KIN — owns them. The sources below are the channels through which the accounts were documented, published or judicially recognised. KIN presents them with full credit to the sources, preserving the meaning of the documented accounts.

- LOUIS GERARD — interview granted to Héctor Perez, KIN Editorial, June 2026.
- KURIAN DAVID — public records of the federal case David v. Signal International (US District Court, EDLA, Feb. 2015), with coverage by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the ACLU.
- *RAJESH — statement to an antitrafficking organisation in Southeast Asia (name withheld on request) · cross-verified with the OHCHR report of August 2023.

On method: this episode adopts the non-punishment principle publicly defended by organisations such as La Strada International — as a matter of public doctrine, not institutional relationship.

Names marked with an asterisk have been altered by the sources themselves to protect the people involved.

LOUIS GERARD.

HAITI → DARIÉN GAP · 2023 CROSSING

38 YEARS OLD · HUSBAND · FATHER OF A 4-YEAR-OLD

Louis Gerard crossed the Darién in 2023 with his wife, his sister and his four-year-old son in his arms. They went overland from Colombia, along the only known route for those trying to reach the United States from the south. They paid the local coyotes. They bought boots. They bought tarpaulin.

Halfway through the jungle, they were intercepted. Six to eight armados. The demand: **US\$ 100 per head**. The family had the money. Many others around them did not.

Louis is one of the few verifiable faces of that crossing because he made it through. He is also the exception that spells out the rule: for every Louis, hundreds of others will never enter any report.

The body as toll. Where money does not cover the fee demanded in the middle of the jungle, the currency changes form. According to Médecins Sans Frontières, in 2023 alone **676 survivors of sexual violence** were treated at MSF's two medical stations on the Panamanian side of the Darién. In a single week of October, there were more than one hundred cases.

The violence is not a deviation from the route — it is part of the route. It works as payment, as punishment, as control, and as a demonstration of power for those still to arrive. What Louis saw on the other side of the forest, and chose not to narrate in detail, many families lived through to the end.

VERIFIED TESTIMONY

"WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF HE HAD ASKED."

LOUIS GERARD · ON HIS 4-YEAR-OLD SON'S CROSSING

"My son is four years old. He says whatever he thinks. When the armed men stopped us, I could think of only one thing: if he asks a question out loud right now, if he points to one of the guns, if he cries the wrong way — what happens? We paid the hundred dollars. But I spent the rest of the crossing asking myself what would have happened if he had asked."

ONE OUT OF 520,000

Louis crossed in 2023 — the peak year. That year, the Clan del Golfo took in approximately **US\$ 125 for each of the 520 thousand people** who passed through. That is sixty-five million dollars in toll in twelve months — collected from people who had already left everything behind.

KURIAN DAVID.

KERALA (INDIA) → ORANGE, TEXAS • 2006-2008

WELDER • TESTIFIED BEFORE A FEDERAL JURY • NAMED PLAINTIFF IN DAVID V. SIGNAL INTERNATIONAL

Kurian David was a welder in Kerala, southern India, when he heard of the opening. An American company needed to rebuild offshore platforms in the Gulf of Mexico after Hurricane Katrina. They offered fair wages, permanent green cards for the family, decent housing. Kurian paid the recruiters somewhere between US\$ 10,000 and US\$ 20,000 — money he raised with years of savings and loans from relatives.

He arrived at Orange, Texas, in 2006. What he found: housing guarded by security. **Twenty-four men** in a space equivalent to a double-wide trailer. Guards called him by number, not name. Body searches on entry and exit. Monthly deductions of US\$ 1,050 from his own salary as "rent". No proof the green card would come.

Kurian did not run. He reported. And he agreed to testify before a jury. In February 2015, a federal jury in New Orleans awarded **US\$ 14.1 million** in damages to five workers, Kurian among them. Signal International filed for bankruptcy five months later.

FEDERAL JURY TESTIMONY

"THEY CALLED US BY NUMBER."

DAVID V. SIGNAL INTERNATIONAL • FEB 2015

"We were twenty-four men in a space meant for four. The guards came in whenever they wanted. They started calling us by number — never by name. I had a number. I spent three years with a number."

Kurian is not a pseudonym. It is a public name —
because the courage to testify is what made the
jury hold a company traded on Wall Street to
account.

SOURCES • SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER • ACLU •
AL.COM • HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST • FEDERAL CASE
RECORDS

*RAJESH.

CHENNAI (INDIA) → MYAWADDI (MYANMAR) · 2023

27 YEARS OLD · SOFTWARE ENGINEER · SCAM-CENTER SURVIVOR · NAME ALTERED

*Rajesh saw the ad on LinkedIn. A "tech" company headquartered in Bangkok was looking for customer-service analysts. Salary: nearly triple what he earned in Chennai. Flight paid. Visa arranged. He flew in May 2023.

At Bangkok airport, he was met by two men who said, "there is an office change". A van drove him north for twelve hours, to the border with Myanmar. Crossing the Moei River, he was handed off to other men. His phone was already in their pocket. His passport too.

He spent eleven months in a compound near Myawaddi. He shared a dormitory with twelve other men — Indian, Malaysian, Kenyan. All of them ran pig butchering: they built fake relationships on dating apps with women in the United States, in Germany, in Australia. They won their trust. Then they convinced them to "invest" in a fictitious cryptocurrency platform.

Each operator had a daily quota. Missing the quota meant a beating. Meeting the quota meant staying locked in. He was freed in April 2024 by a cross-border Thai police operation. "Freed" is the report's word. *Rajesh uses another: "discarded".

PROTECTED TESTIMONY

**"THEY SAY I WAS RESCUED.
I WAS DISCARDED."**

STATEMENT TO A PROTECTION ORGANISATION ·
BANGKOK · 2024

"When the police arrived, the operators fled through the jungle. They left the computers on. We were still sitting in the chairs. We were not freed. We were left behind. When a scam center becomes too costly, they move to another one. Whoever is left over becomes the border's problem."

FORCED CRIMINALITY · OHCHR 2023

The only category of trafficking in which the victim can be arrested before being recognised as a victim. Many operators freed from scam centers face charges, in their countries of origin, for crimes committed while under coercion.

INVISIBILITY AS ARCHITECTURE.

The whole economy of this episode can be summed up in one sentence: **the invisibility of contemporary human trafficking is not an accident — it is architecture.** It is built into the visa that ties body to employer. Into the legal exemption that allows fishing without leaving the boat. Into the inspection that never happens.

It is also built into the rhetoric. As long as the crime is described as a survival of the past — "modern slavery" — we look for abolitionists when we need auditors. We look for chains when we need contracts. We look for individual culprits when the crime is an **integrated industry.**

The Darién was shut in 2025. Trafficking was not. It changed route. That is what an adaptive technology does. And that is what this episode has asked you to look at with new eyes.

It does not need
chains.
It has other
names.

— CODA · KIN N6

SOURCES & REFERENCES

SOURCES.

01 GLOBAL SCALE

Global Estimates of Modern Slavery

ILO / IOM / Walk Free · 2022 · 50M in modern slavery, 27.6M in forced labour, US\$ 236bn in annual profit.

Global Report on Trafficking in Persons

UNODC · 2024 · +25% detected victims in 2022 vs 2019, 38% children, 58% domestic trafficking.

02 PALERMO · LEGAL BASIS

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons

United Nations · Palermo, 2000 · Legal definition in three elements: action, means, purpose.

03 KAFALA · ARAB GULF

Reality Check series

Amnesty International · 2016–2022 · Investigation of migrant workers in Qatar ahead of the World Cup.

Migrant-Rights.org · Amnesty · ITUC

Continuous coverage of the kafala system across the six GCC states.

04 SCAM CENTERS · SOUTHEAST ASIA

Online Scam Operations and Trafficking into Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia

OHCHR · August 2023 · Estimate of 120,000 people in Myanmar and 100,000 in Cambodia in forced labour inside compounds.

05 DARIÉN · CORRIDOR

Interview with Héctor Perez

KIN Editorial · June 2026 · Testimony on the 98% drop and the dam effect. Data: 250K (2022), 520K (2023), 22% children, 676 survivors of sexual violence treated by MSF.

[kin.institute](#) · [KIN_Hector_Darien_EN-1.pdf](#)

Darién Gap analysis

GI-TOC · 2023–2025 · Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

DHS Statistics

U.S. Department of Homeland Security · May 2025 · Confirmation of a 98% drop in crossings in the first quarter of 2025.

06 OPERATORS · SOUTH

EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment

Europol · SOCTA 2024 · 821 active networks, 112 nationalities. Albanian group as the most active single-nationality group in sex trafficking in Western Europe.

InSight Crime + DIA (Italy)

Coverage of 'Ndrangheta ↔ PCC and of the Colombian Clan del Golfo.

07 OPERATORS · NORTH (U.S.)

USA v. Patricio et al · Operation Blooming Onion

U.S. Attorney's Office · SD Georgia · Nov 2021. ProPublica (Max Blau, Sept 2025). The Bitter Southerner ("Blood, Sweat & Tears", 2022).

David v. Signal International

U.S. District Court · Eastern District of Louisiana · Feb 2015 · US\$ 14.1M in damages. Southern Poverty Law Center · ACLU · Human Rights First.

Additional cases

Global Horizons · Ramos Brothers (Immokalee) · El Monte Thai · U.S. v. Kil Soo Lee · U.S. v. Bladimir Moreno (Los Villatoros) · AP investigation on Hawaiian fishing (2016).