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Changing Attitudes Key to Ending Child Sex Trade

By Johanna Son

MANILA (IPS) - Activists hope to chip away at the child sex trade in Asia not only through tougher laws and police action, but by changing social factors and attitudes that have abetted the boom in child sex tourism in the region.

In recent years many Western countries have passed laws to discourage sex tourism by making their nationals liable for sexual abuse of children overseas, but campaigners say this is not going to be enough.

Anti-sex tourism campaigners are training their sights on educating and warning Asian families whose children are potential victims. They are also targeting potential sex tourists from Western countries -- where offenders largely come from -- and the children themselves.

"The ultimate solution to the problem lies in changing human attitudes and human values," said Ron O'Grady, international coordinator of End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT), an advocacy group formed in Bangkok in 1990.

At an international conference on pornography held in Manila last week, O'Grady pointed to the difficult fact that "changing laws does not necessarily change human behaviour".

There are up to one million children held in sex slavery and prostitution in Asia, often for tourists inside and outside the region. They are found in Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Taiwan.

Poverty is often cited as the reason for child prostitution's boom in Asia, but ECPAT finds this simplistic. Asked O'Grady: "Why is it that some families sell their children and others do not? Why does this happen in one poor village and not another?"

He cites the case of a woman who sold her daughter in order to buy a television set, or a village headman who brokers the sale of village children to finance his lifestyle or drug habit. "This is not poverty -- this is greed," he says.

This recognition prompted participants at an ECPAT conference in 1992 to say community values are being eroded by materialism and consumerism, which have "promoted a climate in which sexual gratification and the acquisition of wealth have become the goals of many people and the symbols of happiness".

More often, however, children are abducted and sold to syndicates or brokers who pass them on to brothel operators for several hundred dollars each.

Police have raided brothels in the Thai coastal town of Ranong which cater to hundreds of thousands of Burmese seamen who live there illegally. ECPAT says there remains at least 40 brothels, complexes of more than 100 filthy cubicles where mostly Burmese girls are forced to have 30 customers a night.

Up to 200,000 women and children are sold into servitude in Pakistan each year, many abducted in Bangladesh and sold for sex.

In 1993 Thai legislator Narong Noyomthai said at least 150 underage girls from Burma, Laos or China were smuggled into Thailand each week, swelling the ranks of the more than 100,000 Thai child prostitutes.

Syndicates bring Filipino girls to East Malaysia, Nepalese girls to India and Indian girls to as far as the Middle East, O'Grady says in his 1994 book 'The Rape of the Innocent'.

In some countries children are tricked by foreigners, paedophiles who stay in an Asian country for longer periods, frequent its sun-kissed beaches or live there as retirees. Young girls are tempted to leave their homes for cities in search of a better life, where they risk ending up as sex workers.

O'Grady says ECPAT is trying to educate families, especially in rural Asia, "to see that they do not have to sell their children".

Village children, including those in northern Thailand that is the main recruiting ground for the country's sex industry, are being taught about the dangers of working in cities. There, girls in villages like Bansan Luang are expected to enter brothels at the age of 12 and earn money for their families.

Efforts are also under way to dampen demand for the child sex trade. Air travellers in Switzerland, France and Sweden get warning notes about sex tourism in their tickets. Last year, German tour groups agreed with their hotels in Asia to bar guests from bringing to their rooms girls below 18 years of age.

A children's book in Thailand talks about child sex slaves killed in a brothel fire in Pattaya a few years ago and has encouraged Thai children to discuss the problem.

O'Grady says religious missions ranging from Christian to Buddhist groups are helping curb the child sex trade in Asia, discussing it in sermons, classes and pamphlets. But ECPAT also found out that "many of (the paedophiles) are listed as missionaries or church workers", O'Grady adds.

Reported cases include an Australian Catholic priest who raised funds for a vocational training project for boys and who abused them sexually, and a U.S. Mormon who ran a paedophile network from Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Activists are seeking a much more concentrated effort to reinforce people's attitudes against child prostitution. O'Grady says the urgency is highlighted by the fact that cases of successful rehabilitation of children who are sexually abused repeatedly are "extremely rare".