

THE LOST CHILDREN

Is there any hope for the hundreds of thousands of Asian youngsters trapped in the sex trade?

- *By Peter Cordingley and Alison Dakota Gee*

AT FIRST sight, they looked like a family of five on holiday in Europe. Except that the four Asian children being led through Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport had no luggage. The youngsters -- two boys and two girls, ranging in age from 6 to 12 -- also seemed fearful. And with good reason. Not only were they strangers to each other, none of them knew the man they were with.

Those were the bare details of a chilling child-smuggling operation uncovered by Italian authorities last November. If it hadn't been for alert immigration officials, each of the children would probably have ended up in a different European city, where he or she would have been sold as a sex slave to a waiting customer.

They were saved by the fact that the oldest, a 12-year-old girl, had learned just a few words of a foreign language. As they were being shuffled past Italian passport control, she used them. "Il n'est pas mon père," she blurted out in shaky French. "He is not my father."

Who were these children? Press reports have never made that clear. Some said they were Cambodian; others suggested they were Chinese. And how did one of them manage to learn French? That question has not been answered either. What does seem certain is that the man they were with, a 51-year-old Cambodian named Cao Leng Hout, had collected them at Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport. And he had made similar runs before. In his bag, say police, were addresses and a catalogue of hundreds of photographs of Asian children, mostly girls, aged eight to 14.

The four children with Cao unwittingly turned the international spotlight on Asia's child-sex trade. It is difficult to give even approximate figures on how many of the region's children are caught up in this evil business. Some say a million. Possibly, but who can be sure when so much is hidden from public view and when the victims are terrorized into silence or degraded to the point that they do not even think to protest?

Some estimates put the number of under-age prostitutes in Thailand at 400,000. Of the 200,000 or so street children in the Philippines, about 60,000 sell their bodies. The total number of under-age sex workers in the country, including part-timers and those in bars and brothels, is probably beyond calculation. India? About 400,000. Sri Lanka: over 28,000. Taiwan: between 40,000 and 60,000. Elsewhere? Who knows?

As for the cost of a young body, you can buy a child for as little as \$1.40 in Delhi. A virgin or a boy or girl under six can cost upward of \$140. In Hong Kong, a girl prostitute normally charges \$135, boys a lot less. In Malaysia, the price of a virgin is \$2,000. A 14-year-old girl or boy can be provided for \$250 in Jakarta.

This trade is a stain on Asia's name. And it is growing in size, profits and depravity even as the region becomes wealthier and more sophisticated. In his distressingly frank book *The Child and the Tourist*, Ron O'Grady writes: "When you encounter some of the young boys and girls who have become the victims of this trade, you begin to realize why the prostitution of children is now being seen as a crime against humanity."

Not all children are duped into this hellish world. Some pragmatically choose it as the only way out of poverty. A few even become relatively well off. But the vast majority are victims. Shelly is one of them. She was spotted one night by pimps in Manila's Luneta Park, a notorious hunting ground for commercial sex. "They promised to give me an education," she says. "I wanted to take a course in computer science." Instead, Shelly was drugged. When she woke up, she was in a room in a red-light district. She was fully clothed, except for her underpants. Unconscious, she had been sold to her first client. She was 14.

Southeast Asia is now the No. 1 world destination for tourists looking for sex. Many are from the West, but, contrary to popular belief, they are probably not the majority. Great numbers of Japanese and Chinese are also drawn by the low prices, easy access to prostitutes of either sex and almost any age and the absence -- or lack of enforcement -- of laws. Some cases have even involved Asian national politicians. But there is a distinction between sex seekers in general and hardcore pedophiles -- those who are sexually attracted to children.

Says Wanchai Roujanavong, chairperson of the Thailand-based Coalition to Fight Against Child Exploitation (FACE): "Most pedophiles do not come in a group. They travel individually or with one friend. They don't use a tour operator, because they have their own society they can contact in each country. There are a lot of associations that pedophiles can turn to, many of them in the U.S. They have their own newsletters, magazines and Internet Web sites. They know exactly who to contact when they arrive."

Western pedophiles are particularly attracted to Asian children. They generally have smoother skin than Caucasians and grow body hair later. So a boy of 12 can look as young as an eight-year-old. The illusion of having sexual relations with an infant is heightened. And because many of the children do not speak much English, forcible sex can often be passed off as a misunderstanding.

Chinese pedophiles prize sexual intercourse with young girls for the rejuvenating properties they believe are associated with the act. Author O'Grady says: "There is a surprisingly large number of aging and wealthy Chinese businessmen who believe they must deflower a virgin at least once a year to gain the energy needed to be successful in their business enterprise and have a long life." Social workers quote many girl prostitutes as saying their first experience of sex was being held down while an elderly Chinese man forced himself upon them. Female pedophiles are also known to visit Southeast Asia, but their numbers are believed to be small.

In Sri Lanka, the child sex business often makes use of children from orphanages along a stretch of coast from Negombo, north of the capital, Colombo, down to the southern coastline. Children from the orphanages, some of them run by Westerners, are taken to hotels to service foreign customers. The beaches are open pick-up spots. Tourists and prostitutes -- mostly boys -- can be seen engaged in horseplay, and more, in the shallow water.

Taiwan social workers say 80% of the island's girl hookers have been tricked or lured into the trade, usually through advertisements for easy, high-paying jobs as "princesses" in swanky teahouses or KTVs -- the local version of karaoke bars. Once hired, many of them are introduced to drugs, usually amphetamines and cocaine. "As soon as a girl is addicted, she can't get out," says Chi Hui-hung, head of the Garden of Hope Center in Taipei. Their clients are mainly locals --

for the simple reason that prices are high (around \$145), so there is not a large sex-tourism trade in Taiwan.

Even in Malaysia, where the government purports to take an aggressive stand on moral issues, large numbers of girls under 16 are involved in prostitution. Says Aegile Fernandez, who works with the Kuala Lumpur-based Women's Force: "The girls we are now encountering -- both foreign and local -- are getting younger and younger."

The trafficking of young girls into Malaysia has become a brisk business. "Now, we see them from Nepal and India," says Fernandez. "They are brought in via Thailand, Singapore or East Malaysia. In their passports, their age is listed as 18 or 19. But if you talk to them, you find out they're really 14."

Malaysian crime syndicates put these youngsters to work in apartments, condominiums and clubs. Some are delivered by mini-cab to clients' homes or to hotel rooms. In return, the young hookers are given two meals a day and supplied with clothes and cosmetics. "Money is never given to them," says Fernandez. "If they have cash, they will escape."

Karen Radzi, the executive director of Ikhlas, a drop-in center that operates in the Chow Kit working-class area of Kuala Lumpur, tells the story of a 12-year-old Indian Muslim girl who was found in a local brothel. "She ended up there because her father was in debt," says Radzi. "He had decided to pay off his bills by trading in his daughter. The price for sex with her was \$20 to \$25, but she was given to the clients the seasoned girls rejected -- the rough, bullying types. As a result, she was often in a lot of pain. The pimp's solution was to give her heroin. So she's 12 years old, she's being prostituted and she's hooked on heroin. Good God! But at least we got her out of there."

Cambodia is the new frontier for pedophiles. Many of the girls in Phnom Penh's growing number of brothels and bars have been smuggled in against their will from Vietnam or lured from neighboring villages. Some are so young they have no pubic hair or breasts. At home, they would be playing with dolls. Here, they are sex toys.

Virgins are in great demand among Chinese from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong. The going rate for these innocent bodies: up to about \$500. But, once deflowered, the girl loses nearly all her value. Her price drops to \$10; after another week of customers, it is \$5. Eventually, sex with her will cost no more than \$3. Many of these children are forced to receive several customers a night.

A senior Cambodian official estimates that half the country's under-age brothel workers have been tricked or forced into the trade by friends or members of their own family. One young Vietnamese girl, smuggled past border controls, confided that her stepfather had sold her. A 16-year-old Cambodian said she woke up to find herself the property of a small Phnom Penh brothel. Her aunt had drugged her into unconsciousness and handed her over to the owner for a few hundred dollars. Yet another girl, 14, said her mother, who was suffering a serious illness, had sold her into prostitution to raise money for medication. "How can I be angry with her?" she said. "She's my mom and she is sick."

Western men can often be seen on Phnom Penh streets with young boys, most of them left homeless by poverty or by the war and its aftermath. Many of the boys survive by begging and scavenging from rubbish heaps. But there is faster and better money to be made from a few moments with French, British, German or Australian tourists, who make up the bulk of the known clientele.

Much of the local brothel trade is centered on Phnom Penh's 154th Street, which runs straight to the front door of the national police headquarters. Policemen are said to be among the regular patrons. Word about this safe haven for pedophiles has spread quickly. Says FACE's Wanchai: "Just recently, police in France arrested a pedophile who had in his possession newsletters that warned it is no longer [legally] safe to have sex with children in Thailand. The newsletter said it was better to go to Cambodia. That is now the place where there is an abundance of children for hire."

Cambodia is not the only new frontier for the buying and selling of young bodies. There is also the Internet. In the faceless cyber-universe, anyone with a PC and a modem can access this deviant world. One website offers what it terms "a collection of prostitution-related information about many countries in the world." Even a cursory search leads to pedophile-friendly newsgroups offering tips on sex with boys. One site features photographs of nude Japanese schoolgirls in erotic poses -- ready to be downloaded with the click of a mouse. Also available on the Internet: a Cambodian child for sale. The price: \$6.

"Is sex with children so very unusual?" runs the heading of one newsgroup discussion. Another says, "Help! I am a pedo tired of fantasy, ready to start doing." The writer, who goes under the name "Mouse Potato," says: "For whatever reason, I've been sexually attracted to kids ever since puberty. I can't talk about it to anyone, of course, but for the last 18 months, I've been watching these newsgroups, downloading pedo stories and pictures. It's nice to know that there are so many of us who agree that adult-child sexual contact doesn't have to be bad. Lately, I've been wondering if perhaps it is now time to start fulfilling my fantasies instead of torturing myself. Should I accept who I am and start getting hooked up with kids?"

Mouse Potato ends with a list of questions: "How do I keep kids from talking? Is there an age that is better to start with? I like both boys and girls -- any advantage to starting with one over the other? What is the best way to meet kids?" Among the responses, some supportive, some condemning, was this: "To Mouse Potato -- My advice is to go to Thailand or the Philippines. It's cheap and easy to find kids there."

Thailand lured Bernd Karl-Heinz Neirenz, a 38-year-old German. He is now in prison, serving a 43-year sentence for multiple sexual abuse and conspiring to traffic in pornography. When police arrested Neirenz, they found him with four boys, ranging in age from eight to 13. The youngsters testified that he had induced them to perform sexual acts on each other while he photographed them. Some of the material was used in advertising brochures for pornographic material and child-sex tours to Thailand.

Neirenz's sentence was the most severe handed down to a foreigner for sexual offenses in Thailand -- and a long-awaited sign that Asia may at last be waking up to the scourge in its midst. In December, Thailand enacted tough new legislation in a bid to end child prostitution and sex tourism. Amporn Singhagowin, director-general of the department of welfare, says the law will "enforce harsher penalties on pedophiles, parents who sell their children into prostitution, the owners of establishments offering child prostitutes and officials who permit such places to operate."

Offenders now face two to six years' imprisonment for having sexual relations with anyone under 15 and up to three years for sex with those between 15 and 18. The law deems anyone under 18 a minor, effectively removing the pedophile welcome mat from the nation's doorstep. Will it work? Maybe. Even before the new law went into effect, blatant adult-child relationships had disappeared from the bars and streets of Thailand's sex capital, Pattaya. But the trade may have merely gone underground -- or to Cambodia.

The Philippines, too, is cracking down on child-sex tourism. In 1991, Congress approved the Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act. In 1995, the police began making lightning raids against suspected pedophile activities. From September that year to April 1996, 39 foreign suspects were arrested -- mainly by officers of Task Force Zebra, a unit set up on the orders of President Fidel Ramos.

Authorities the world over are now taking concerted action. In 1992, Interpol established a "standard working party" on offenses against minors. The group, which consists of police in 30 countries, shares expertise and information on pedophile activities and cooperates in the investigation of child-sex crimes.

Results have been impressive. Last year, Thai police arrested four men on charges of smuggling dozens of young women to Japan as part of a sex ring. The Thais were tipped off by U.S. investigators working for Interpol. "We gather intelligence and try to target pedophiles rather than waiting for offenses to take place," says Chief Inspector James Reynolds of London's Metropolitan Police.

Lawmakers in the home countries of pedophile tourists are recognizing that they, too, have a role to play. Bent Bolin, a 69-year-old retired Swedish civil servant, was imprisoned for three months by a Stockholm court for soliciting sex with a 14-year-old while visiting Pattaya. Bolin was charged under a law that allows Swedish courts to try citizens for breaking a Swedish law in another country. Other countries have adopted similar laws or are considering them.

All this is encouraging. But there remains a core problem: many Asian economies rely heavily on tourist dollars. That is why some politicians, at the national and local level, are reluctant to take meaningful measures against the child-sex industry -- and its accompanying specter of an AIDS epidemic. To do so would strike at the heart of economic development.

And if there is no development, there is poverty. And poverty breeds desperation and prostitution. FACE's Wanchai says that in northern Thailand, some rural parents rear their daughters with the belief that they are meant to "sacrifice" themselves for the good of the family. In some cases, families sell their daughters into prostitution to earn money for television sets, video cameras, karaoke machines or even a nicer home.

Unicef, the U.N. children's welfare organization, says: "The push to own, buy, rent -- fueled by advertising, magazines and the entertainment media -- encourages those who do not value their children. They simply trade them in for something they want more." Unicef believes that children throughout Asia will continue to be exploited sexually if society constantly tells them that possessions are more important than dignity.

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