

Children for sale- 24 April, 2004

» NBC News

It's an exotic vacation destination, with ancient cities, bold colors, legendary temples, remarkable beauty - and horrendous crimes that go on behind closed doors. Children, some as young as 5 years old, are being sold as slaves for sex. It's a shameful secret that's now capturing the attention of the world and the White House, a secret that has been exposed by Dateline's hidden cameras. Dateline ventured into this dark place, where sexual predators can gain access to terrified children for a handful of cash. How could this be happening? And how can it be stopped?

Inside the world of child sex trafficking, each year, by some estimates, hundreds of thousands of girls and boys are bought, sold or kidnapped and then forced to have sex with grown men. Dateline's investigation leads to the troubled and distant land of Cambodia. We reveal what "tourists," like one American doctor, may be up to, and we'll take you inside a dramatic operation to rescue the children.

The night clubs of Bangkok and the windows of Amsterdam are among the most well-known destinations in what has become a multibillion-dollar industry: sex tourism. But the business is not all about adult prostitution. There are some places you might never have heard about, notorious places, the kind of places a sexual predator would be willing to travel halfway around the world to reach - destinations like a dusty village in Southeast Asia, where the prey is plentiful and easy to stalk.

They are children born into poverty and sold for sex. And while the thousands of men who flock here each year - many of them Americans - may think that they're involved in nothing more than prostitution, by any definition it is rape.

The small Buddhist country of Cambodia has a rich cultural heritage, but it has become a magnet for people who prey on the young and innocent. To follow their trail, we'll have to infiltrate their perverted world and pretend we're predators ourselves. It's the only way we'll be able to see first-hand how serious the problem really is - so serious that President Bush told the United Nations it has become a top priority for his administration. Secretary of State Colin Powell is leading the administration's efforts and has a special office dedicated to the problem.

Chris Hansen: "Why has child sex trafficking become such an important issue for you and the Bush administration?"

Colin Powell: "Because it's the worst kind of human exploitation imaginable. Can you imagine young children, learning their ABCs or whatever the equivalent is in their language, being used as sexual slaves for predators? It is a sin against humanity, and it is a horrendous crime."

On the front lines

To combat that crime, increasingly the administration has been turning to people like Gary Haugen, a former federal prosecutor who runs a human rights group called the International Justice Mission. Haugen's group uses tactics that are considered controversial by some in the human rights community. He sends his investigators undercover to gather evidence of sex slavery in other countries, then takes the evidence to local authorities to persuade them to take action. Their work helped rescue hundreds of women and children around the world.

This time the target is Cambodia, and a Dateline team is headed there undercover.

After an 11,000-mile journey, our producer and cameraman set up shop in a hotel in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, where they assemble our state-of-the-art equipment and rig themselves with hidden cameras.

Cambodia still suffers from a traumatic past. In the 1970s and '80s, an estimated 2 million Cambodians died because of war, famine and a brutal dictatorship.

Now there are signs of recovery, thanks in part to the three-quarters-of-a-million foreign visitors who come to Cambodia each year. Our hidden cameras found that many tourists come not to visit the historic sites, but for another purpose. They go to a place like Martinis. It's a nightclub where young women outnumber men 10 to one, and many of the women are for sale.

Even though prostitution is illegal in Cambodia, finding a girlfriend for the night at Martinis takes just a few words, a few dollars, and a stroll out the door. But the action at Martinis pales compared with what else we're about to see in Cambodia.

Early one morning, our producer walks out the front door of the hotel and is greeted by a local motor bike taxi driver, who explains how easy it is to find girls for sale:

Twelve-year-olds for sale. As shocking as that sounds, we're about to find out in some places that's considered old. Children who should be in elementary school are being exploited by adults.

A human rights investigator we'll call Robert is acting as a sex tour guide for a Dateline producer and cameraman posing undercover. The investigator is a former police detective from New Zealand. We agreed not to show his face or use his real name, because of his ongoing undercover work.

Robert has developed local contacts who know where to go and whom to see. All it takes is a quick phone call for this man to arrange a visit to a brothel in Phnom Penh.

The producers and investigators arrive across from what looks like a local café, but it's really a brothel. The owner is a woman who goes by the name Madam Lang. She's eager to do business. She leads the group through the café and up a back staircase to meet some girls for hire. And when she says they're girls, she means it literally: young girls, younger than we even imagined. And as an extra attraction, she says they're still virgins.

Trapped in tragedy

Many sex tourists come to Cambodia for exactly that reason, and they're willing to pay a premium. Madam Lang tells us her virgins go for \$600, and for that price she says we can take a girl back to the hotel and keep her there for up to three days. When she brings out the girl, the 15-year-old looks paralyzed with fear.

A child's tragic journey into the sex trade often begins in a family struggling for survival. This is a country where the average income is less than \$300 a year. Some children are sold by their own parents. Others are lured by what they think are legitimate job offers like waitressing, but then are forced into prostitution.

One 14-year-old, who was recently freed from a brothel, says she came from an extremely poor family in the country next door, Vietnam. She says when she was walking home from school one day, she was approached by a woman offering work in a café. But the café turned out to be a brothel. With no money and no way to get home, she didn't have much of a choice and was forced into sex with grown men, many of them American.

At best the girls' families get a few hundred dollars, a debt the girls then owe to the brothel owners. It can take years to work it off. It's a form of slavery. And when this girl refused to go along, she says she was beaten:

Girl: "I thought, I am here to serve coffee, not be a prostitute. But the boss told me that I had to be a prostitute. She forced me, and I was scared. I did not want to go with those men, but being beaten was worse."

So she tried to run away.

Girl: "I got captured. They forced me into a room for three days and three nights. They beat me. They did not let me have anything to eat or drink. And they sold me to a different brothel." All this comes as no secret to the Cambodian government. Mu Soc Hua is Cambodia's minister of women's affairs.

Hansen: "Cambodia has a lot of problems. Where do you rank the child sex trade?"

Mu Soc Hua: "I rank sexual trade, sexual exploitation of our children as top - on the top of my list."

Hansen: "Is there any way to even attach a number to this to say how many children?"

Mu Soc Hua: "Around 30,000."

Hansen: "That's a staggering number."

Mu Soc Hua: "Yes. Yes."

Inside Phnom Penh

She says it's happening all over the country, but there's one place that is notorious. Any taxi driver can tell you it's the place to go if you're looking for the youngest girls. Svay Pak is a rundown village on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. A 20-minute drive, and we're on a dirt road dotted with cafes and gated storefronts. It takes just a second for a pimp to approach.

Everyone in Svay Pak assumes we are here for sex. When we sit down at one of the cafes, we're greeted by a young hustler named Po. He's only 15 but already a real operator. He tells us he's grown up in the village and introduces his mother - who knows exactly what he's up to and takes a cut of the money he brings in.

Po says he can get us girls who are even younger than the ones we saw at that brothel in the city. And despite all we've seen, we're stunned at just how young he says they are - 8-year-olds. It's hard to believe. He tells us to come see for ourselves. Along with a human rights investigator, we follow Po through some alleys into a ramshackle house. We think we've already seen it all, but who could be prepared for this?

Girls, some so young they could be in kindergarten, are all for sale. Throughout the village, we see the same scene at one brothel after another. Everyone here seems to know a little English. When they talk about sex, they use simple child-like terms anyone can understand. "Yum-yum" means oral sex. "Boom-boom" means intercourse.

We meet dozens of children. One girl says she's nine. She's joined by another who says she's 10. Both say they know how to perform oral sex. And they even tell us how much it will cost: \$60 for

two girls. A pimp says if two girls aren't enough, how about three? Our team then leaves saying we may come back later. In the car, the grim reality has set in for the International Justice Mission's chief investigator, Bob Mosier. In 20 years as a cop, he says, he's never seen anything like this.

Bob Mosier: "You have an 8-year-old or 9-year-old little girl you know just looking at you smiling, realizing that you're going to in just a few moments possibly, probably going to engage in a sexual act they're going to get money for, and they're smiling about it. I mean I see a smile like that on my kids' face when they're finding out they're going to go to Disney World or something like that."

But the tourists in Svay Pak are a far cry from the ones you see at Disney World, and they're not anxious to talk about why they're here. But last year, a human rights investigator with a hidden camera found a visitor who was willing to admit he was not visiting for the scenic beauty or the local cuisine.

The American 'tourist'

When the camera was hidden, an American prowling Svay Pak was happy to brag about his exploits. He's an American doctor, whom we saw repeatedly while we were in Cambodia. Dr. Jerry Albom is radiologist from Oklahoma, but on the streets of Svay Pak he offers pointers to a man he believes is a sex tourist.

The International Justice Mission's Gary Haugen says he'd like to see people like Dr. Albom and the pimps who supply him put out of action. Haugen has a plan. He wants to mount a daring operation, to bust the pimps and to rescue the children. Now the question is can he put his plan into action.

What he can do, he hopes, is prompt the government there to join his cause. But this is Cambodia, so chaotic it's hard to cross the street much less get the police to take action. If you really want results, what you need is the blessing of senior Cambodian government officials. But getting their attention requires help from someone with real clout. So Haugen has taken his evidence to the U.S. ambassador, who in turn has agreed to make the case.

Plan for raid takes shape

It takes a week, but finally, the Cambodians sign on to Haugen's plan. It involves tricking the pimps into bringing the girls to a supposed sex party at a house outside the village. There it will be easier for the police to arrest the pimps and rescue the children.

To get the pimps on board, Robert, the investigator posing as a sex tour guide, has been telling them that his clients are reluctant to come into the village. Robert has discovered it really is dangerous.

When he tried to sell the sex party idea to one of the pimps, the man asked if Robert had a hidden camera. Then he asked Robert to prove he was for real and have sex with a 5-year-old girl. And when Robert refused, the pimp got angry. Finally, the pimp threatened him.

Robert kept searching until he found other pimps willing to let some of the girls leave the village for the supposed "sex party." The pimps say they want to come along to keep an eye on the children, which plays right into the plan, because remember when they arrive at the house, they'll be arrested.

These wouldn't be the first arrests in Svay Pak. The Cambodian police have set up a unit to deal with sex trafficking. But they've never been involved in anything like this. This time, sixty officers are being assigned to the raid.

But the big question is: can they all be trusted? There are no guarantees because many of the cops are in the pimps' pockets, like the one caught on Robert's hidden camera. He thought Robert was really a sex tour operator and for \$150 promised he could make sure neither Robert nor his clients would be arrested.

One hundred fifty dollars - that's the equivalent of five months pay for the average Cambodian cop. If a cop like this finds out about the raid, he could alert the pimps.

The operation begins with a ride on a bus which is also supposed to be used to rescue the girls from Svay Pak. The bus waits on the outskirts of the village. A half a dozen motor bike drivers take the producers and investigators to go get the girls. The drivers stop by a pathway that leads to the brothel, where the girls are supposed to be waiting.

Initially, there's no sign of the children. But after much discussion with the pimps, finally, two children, sisters are brought into the waiting area. The investigators have seen these girls twice before. The first time, they were brand new to Svay Pak and had not yet been sold for sex. But only a few weeks later, the girls apparently had lost their innocence. They'd been forced to perform oral sex.

Now, if they're lucky, these girls will never have to do that again. That's if everything goes according to plan.

At first, everything seems on track, but then suddenly the pimps change their minds and won't let the girls leave the brothel. Investigator Bob Mosier suspects the operation has been compromised.

It's not clear how much the pimps know, but it seems they've picked up on rumors of an investigation. They may be suspicious, but they're not exactly chasing anyone away. In fact, they want the sex party to take place right here, right now, and there isn't much of a choice, so our producers and the investigators play along. There is a back-up plan -- a phone call to alert the police who are supposed to be standing by. Who knows when or even if they'll show up?

It hasn't all gone according to plan, but at the end of the day a dozen suspected pimps and madams are in custody, and 37 girls rescued, many under the age of 10. As they're loaded into a van, they're in shock and in tears and don't seem to understand that they're about to be taken to a safe place. Escorted by officers from the Cambodian Ministry of Interior, they pull away from this place where they lost so much, hopefully never to return.

Gary Haugen, the head of the human rights group that made all this happen, is thankful, though he had hoped more children would be rescued.

And he says, while it's good to prosecute the people who sell children for sex, if you want to solve the problem; you also have to go after the tourists who buy them. But who is going to confront these sex tourists? In the case of that American doctor, we do.

Why should the U.S. get involved?

This issue has become a top priority for the Bush administration. It's for that reason Secretary of State Colin Powell agreed to look at what we found, including the videotape of Dr. Albom.

Powell: "He may be a doctor but he's a criminal. He's a criminal and if he can be brought to justice, he will be brought to justice. The law requires it. And he won't have to worry about being a doctor because he'll be doing time in jail and that's where he belongs. More than that, he probably needs to see several dozen psychiatrists if that's what turns him on."

Hansen: "Why should Americans be concerned about the sex trade in Cambodia?"

Powell: "How can we turn away? If we want to have friends in the world, if we want to have better relations with the countries of the world, we have to help them with this kind of problem." Help them or pressure them - the U.S. government can impose sanctions on countries the State Department says aren't doing enough, which may be why the Cambodians recently arrested two American men accused of having sex with children, and sent them back to the U.S. for prosecution.

In the end, at least seven of the suspects we saw, including a man who supplied little girls for the sex party, were recently found guilty by a Cambodian judge and sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. In mid-January, Madam Lang, the woman who offered us virgins for \$600, was also convicted and sentenced to 20 years behind bars. That's believed to be the longest sentence of its kind ever in Cambodia.

Future for the children

As for the children we saw taken out of the brothels, they were brought to a safe house for a few days. Then they were placed in group homes: one for the younger girls and one for teens, which is run by a charity called AFESIP. The director of AFESIP, Pierre Legros, says getting the girls out of the brothels is tough, but keeping them in the group home is even tougher. He estimates that on average 40 percent of the rescued girls return to a life of prostitution.

In October, more than six months after our first visit, Dateline returned to Svay Pak. And despite whatever efforts the Cambodian government is making, we were offered children for sale. We showed our latest hidden camera tapes to Cambodia's Minister for Women's Affairs, Mu Soc Hua. She was not surprised by our findings, she says, because it'll take years to overcome the extreme poverty and widespread corruption that cause the child sex trade to flourish. But she sees the current wave of prosecutions as a step forward.

Mu Sochua: "Yes that is the little, little small ray of light I see at the end of this tunnel. That's why there is hope and we have to continue to fight. Prosecution is the key word, the message has to be very strong and forget about prosecuting the little fish prosecuting everybody who is involved in it."

Secretary of State Powell acknowledges it may not be possible to eliminate the problem totally, but he says putting pressure on countries like Cambodia is the right thing to do.

Powell: "Can you imagine the spread of disease that is taking place with this kind of activity? Can you imagine what will happen to these girls when they're 15 or 20? What will become of them? They'll have no education. They will be -- they will have been used and tossed away and ruined... And a nation such as ours, which says we are a moral nation, and that we have a value system, that we would allow our citizens to go over and fuel that trade, by their presence and by their money and by their rotten exploitation of these children, we wouldn't be living up to our values if we didn't do something about it."

The U.S. government is now giving the human rights group, International Justice Mission, a \$1 million grant to help battle sex trafficking in Cambodia. Also, agents from the Department of Homeland Security who specialize in child sex crimes are now investigating the activities of

dozens of Americans -- including Dr. Jerry Albom -- suspected of traveling abroad to have sex with children.

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