

Men using brothels new targets in Asian anti-trafficking drive

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KUALA LUMPUR, June 28 (AFP) -

Captive girls in brothels around Asia make a mockery of government pledges to curb sex slavery, so activists have a new target -- the men who use them.

"How would you feel if someone did this to your daughter?" asks one of the posters that will soon greet Singaporean men arriving on Indonesia's Batam island, notorious for weekend sex jaunts.

Delegates from Southeast Asian nations declared at a conference in Indonesia in March that all countries should deal with the underlying demand which fuels the flesh trade.

"The approach should be aimed at bringing about behaviour change in men and adolescent males," a conference statement said.

A total of 10 Asian nations were accused in a US State Department report this month of either not doing enough to stop girls being tricked, sold or kidnapped into sex slavery, or of doing nothing at all.

Malaysia is not among them, but the plight of a desperate girl on an 18th floor window ledge in Kuala Lumpur this year illustrated that even a country the United States describes as "making significant efforts" to combat trafficking still has a problem.

Behind her, police found when they broke into an apartment padlocked from the outside, were 15 women from Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam who were being held as sex slaves for the use of paying clients.

Several Asian countries condemned in the US report for lack of action against human trafficking protested that they had been unfairly singled out.

North Korea, which along with Myanmar and Bangladesh is ranked in the lowest Tier Three, called the report "sheer fabrication".

Myanmar's military regime blamed US sanctions, saying they "undermine our economy, taking away resources that could be used to fight human trafficking effectively".

The Philippines, on the Tier Two Watchlist of countries deemed in danger of being downgraded -- along with Japan, India, Laos, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam -- complained the report was "unfair".

But Japan was contrite, saying it would try to do better and announced plans to submit a bill to parliament next year on punishment for human traffickers, who are currently dealt with only under immigration or anti-prostitution laws.

Japan's sex industry, hosted by at least 40,000 women, mainly from the Philippines, Thailand, Colombia, Eastern Europe and China, is widely acknowledged as worth 85 billion dollars a year.

Many men who use Asian brothels believe that it is simply a commercial transaction with benefits on both sides, activists say.

"Some men think they are doing a good deed by paying for sex in Batam, that the girls will starve in their villages," said Saleemah Ismail, manager of the Batam project run by the Singapore chapter of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

But up to 40 percent of the estimated 19,000 sex workers in Batam are under 18, Saleemah told the Singapore Straits Times, announcing that the poster campaign would begin on July 1.

Like girls in brothels around the region, many are tricked with fake job offers into leaving their villages or home countries, but find themselves sold as prostitutes and unable to escape.

The US government estimates that up to 800,000 men, women and children are trafficked across international borders each year, more than half of them for sexual exploitation, and that the multi-billion-dollar trade ranks among the fastest growing transnational crimes.

The huge profits attract crime syndicates, as in Japan where the "yakuza" are often involved, and the rich and powerful bosses are rarely prosecuted.

Instead, in some countries, it is the victims themselves who are punished.

In Malaysia "they're treated like criminals," said Ivy Josiah, executive director of the Women's Aid Organisation.

The girls, who often lack proper identification and travel documents when freed in police raids, end up in detention camps before being deported while "the system protects the pimps and the syndicates," she said.

Josiah added, however, that "there is renewed fervour among Malaysian authorities in nabbing the bigger fish".

Several Asian governments have indicated recently that they plan more strenuous efforts against trafficking, but activists say action often does not match the words, or is too weak to be effective against the growing tide of profit-driven exploitation.

In Cambodia those behind the trade are alleged to include well-connected businesspeople, members of the armed forces, gangsters and government officials.

"Most people being prosecuted are small-time operators further down the ladder while the real leaders never get caught," said Cambodian women's Crisis Centre chairwoman Oung Chan Thol.

Legislation that would give officials more power to arrest and prosecute ringleaders is now being considered, and the government last month launched a billboard campaign aimed at informing victims about how they can escape brothels and receive help.

For girls who are not allowed out of the brothels and see only their captors and clients that is unlikely to make much difference.

Cambodia, however, ranks in the US report among the Tier Two nations making "significant efforts" against trafficking, along with Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan are in Tier One, which means they are complying fully with US and international efforts against the trade in humans.