

ECPAT INTERNATIONAL

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By

HOLIDAYMAKERS who suspect other travellers of abusing children overseas should report them to the police immediately, according to an organisation devoted to ending paedophile tourism.

End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking (ECPAT) has compiled a list of destinations where British sex offenders have abused children, and it is calling on witnesses to contact police and name suspects.

Alternatively people should tell reps, tour guides or travel agents, who can pass on reports, says ECPAT.

“We are calling on holidaymakers and the travel industry to stop turning a blind eye,” said Christine Beddoe, ECPAT’s director in the UK. “It is worth telling your tour rep or travel agents if you believe that children are being targeted — even if you are just suspicious.”

She added that many male holidaymakers may be asked by taxi drivers if they want to be taken to places where child sex is sold. In such instances, people should take down taxi numbers and report the drivers.

Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines, Morocco and The Gambia are among offender hotspots, said Beddoe. But countries in Eastern Europe are increasingly suspected, as low-cost airlines increase their schedules to Poland, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Estonia and Slovakia.

No overall figures are kept. Offenders can either be charged abroad or on their return to the UK, under the 1997 Sex Offenders Act.

Jackie Bennett, corporate communications manager at the National Criminal Intelligence Service, said that it is working with ECPAT and travel companies on a strategy to crack down on paedophile tourists.

“It is early days,” she said. “I’m not going to say what we are doing and what we are not doing, as we do not want offenders to know how we are closing in on them.”

Several travel organisations including Thomson Holidays, Britain’s biggest tour operator, and Accor, which runs the Sofitel, Novotel and Ibis hotel chains, have signed up to

ECPAT's code of conduct. Carlson Wagonlit Travel, one of Britain's biggest business travel agents, has also joined, and is considering training staff on the issues.

An employee at a major UK travel agency, who asked not to be named for fear of losing his job, said that he often comes across "very likely sex tourists who might well be paedophiles".

He said: "Of course I don't know for certain, but when someone turns up in the shop wearing an old mac and asking to pay for a ticket to Thailand in cash — and saying that he doesn't want to give his address or phone number — then it does raise questions.

"It is necessary to give an address, so such a person can't get away with that. But to me, it's pretty obvious that they're up to no good."

However, a spokeswoman for Trailfinders, a major UK travel agency, said that there is no way of vetting bookings to paedophile hotspots. "It would be insulting for us to accuse someone, or report someone, if they were staying in Thailand for a month, even if they regularly book such trips. We are not qualified to judge what people are doing when they travel."

Thai welfare groups estimate that there has been a 20 per cent annual increase in the sexual abuse of children in the country, mostly affecting teenagers who come from poor families.

The groups say that parents are selling children to make ends meet.