



Battle to protect Asia's children; Singapore urged to lead fight; citizens among worst offenders

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REGIONAL activists who have gathered in Singapore to discuss the thriving child sex trade in Asia have called for Singapore to take the lead in tackling the problem. Unicef, the United Nation's agency looking into issues affecting children, estimates there are as many as a million child prostitutes in Asia.

Many are sold into the sex trade by parents trying to pay off debts, others are kidnapped and forced into prostitution, while others enter the trade after fleeing abuse at home.

More than 100 regional government officials and civil society representatives from 10 countries are in town for a conference, hosted by Unifem Singapore and the War Against Trafficking Alliance, on curbing the child sex trade in East and South-east Asia.

The former United Nations Special Rapporteur on child trafficking, Prof Vitit Muntarbhorn of Thailand's Chulalongkorn University, said Singapore is well-placed to take a leadership role in this effort.

"Singapore is already helping Asean on various issues concerning children," he said. "It would be a logical extension of that experience if Singapore tried to promote a programmatic response to the Asean Declaration on trafficking women and children." Singapore could help set up a regional anti-trafficking network and develop training programmes for Asean immigration and law enforcement officers in the detection and prosecution of traffickers.

In an 82-page report on sex tourism in Asia, Dr Mohamed Y Mattar of the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies noted that some Singaporeans travel to Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia for sex.

Dr Mattar said: "Singaporean sex tourists are reported to make up the largest number of sex tourists visiting Indonesia's Riau Islands, where many of those they sexually exploit are under the age of 18."

Unifem Singapore's president Melissa Kwee called for efforts by the public and private sectors to tackle the problem. "Businesses need to be involved, such as the travel industry. Budget airlines that fly to Hat Yai, Phuket and all these other (alleged sex tourism) locations, make them even more accessible," she said.

"While we are thankful that Singaporean children are well-protected and provided for, what happens to children overseas when Singaporeans travel to purchase sex services?

"Those children are not protected. Should we have some responsibility for what our citizens do overseas? Our answer to that is 'Yes'."