

## Moves to curb worrying rise in child sex tourism

STIMES0020050426e14r0000v

Singapore

Theresa Tan

536 Words

27 April 2005

Straits Times

English

(c) 2005 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Conference held here as UN group feels S'pore is ready to take lead in the region in tackling issue

A FILIPINO girl, at the tender age of three, was forced to perform oral sex on strangers. What's worse is that her pimp is her own mother, a drug addict.

The girl's plight is shocking but not unique, said Dr Jean D'Cunha from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem).

Children of increasingly young ages are being forced into prostitution to fuel the billion-dollar tourism trade in child sex, said international experts on prostitution and human trafficking at a conference here.

Add the growing number of similarly victimised young women, and the experts believe that 'millions' are being trafficked worldwide for the sex trade. They are convinced the pool is swelling, but could not offer definitive figures due to the clandestine nature of the trade.

Another emerging trend is the increasing appetite for Internet child pornography, said Thailand's Dr Vitit Muntarbhorn, who added there is a 'great' link between child prostitution and child pornography.

About 130 delegates from 14 countries met in Singapore yesterday for a three-day conference to see how the demand for child sex tourism and sex trafficking in Asia can be tackled and reduced.

The conference, said to be the first of its kind here, is organised by Unifem (Singapore) and its United States-based partner, the War Against the Trafficking Alliance. It was held here because Unifem (Singapore) felt Singapore was ready to take the lead in the region in tackling the issue, said its spokesman.

The US says more than a million children are exploited each year in the global sex trade. Its government has spent about US\$295 million (S\$488 million) supporting anti-trafficking programmes in 120 countries since 2001.

In the region, Asean leaders pledged last year to fight human trafficking, especially that of women and children. They called it an 'emerging regional problem'.

A US expert at yesterday's conference said the victims of sex tourism in South-east Asia are usually girls aged between 10 and 18.

Dr Mohamed Mattar of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies also identified sex tourism hotspots, which include the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Among the methods used to 'recruit' children are abduction, as well as false promises of jobs abroad.

Experts such as Dr Vitit and Dr Mattar suggested several ways of bringing the trade to a halt. They range from engaging hotel chains to fight trafficking, to prosecuting the wrongdoers, including the sex tourists.

In the US, more than a dozen Americans have been convicted of having sex with a child while abroad. They include an 87-year-old who was put behind bars for 20 years for going

to the Philippines for sex with children.

At least 30 countries, such as Australia, have passed laws that prosecute their citizens who travel overseas for child sex.

Like many experts, Dr Mattar acknowledged that it may not be possible to totally eliminate the demand. 'But our goal must at least be to reduce demand,' he added.