

Asean wages war on child sex tourism

STIMES0020050427e14s00001

Prime News

Theresa Tan

603 Words

28 April 2005

Straits Times

English

(c) 2005 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

A travellers' code being prepared will warn tourists against sex with children
STRONG messages will go out from all Asean entry points by the end of the year, warning
travellers not to have sex with children.

Asean officials are now working on the appropriate language for the Asean Travellers' Code, the association's secretary-general, Mr Ong Keng Yong, told The Straits Times yesterday. The 10-member Asean is embarking on a campaign against child sex tourism to fight its image of being a destination for 'child sex escapades', said Mr Ong.

The warnings could be carried on immigration forms, visas, and publicity materials at immigration checkpoints.

They are meant to create a strong association for travellers, in the same way that the region is now known for its zero-tolerance policy on drug trafficking.

'If we allow this image that child sex tourism is flourishing in South-east Asia, it will be very bad for our countries,' Mr Ong said on the sidelines of a conference on child sex tourism and trafficking in Singapore.

He said in the last five years, Asean authorities have become more 'goal-oriented' in combating the problem. There is also greater recognition that they must cooperate to prevent the trafficking of women and children and the movement of known sex offenders across borders.

Much of the region is heavily dependent on tourism revenue, which could suffer from the negative association, he said.

At last November's Asean summit in Vientiane, Laos, Asean leaders pledged to fight human trafficking, especially of women and children. They acknowledged it as an emerging regional problem.

While there is no definitive data on the size of the child sex trade in the region, non-governmental organisations estimate there are over a million child prostitutes in Asia. According to a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University in the United States and presented at the conference, Cambodia, the Philippines and Thailand are hot spots for those seeking sex with minors. Vietnam and Myanmar are emerging hot spots.

Experts at the conference - attended by about 130 delegates from 14 countries - acknowledged that the complex problem had to address both demand and supply.

In his speech to participants, Mr Ong suggested that some of the measures for dealing with terrorism could be applied to trafficking, for example, freezing the funds of syndicates known to deal in child sex.

He acknowledged, however, that moves to choke supply were hampered by problems of poverty and corruption in some countries, which ensured a ready stream of children forced into prostitution.

Measures to fight the child sex trade should include public education, community involvement and greater collaboration between governments and non-governmental groups, he said.

Asean members are also boosting their tourism infrastructure, creating more jobs which offer viable alternatives to their poorer citizens, while police are sharing blacklists of known child sex tourists in informal bilateral arrangements with their Asean neighbours.

The Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) and Unifem (Singapore) welcomed the moves, but said they could be strengthened.

Aware president Braema Mathi said warning messages could be carried on transport modes, such as budget airlines and coaches, to popular sex destinations.

She also called for harsher penalties on brothels which employ child sex workers and their clients.

Unifem backed Mr Ong's call to freeze the funds of syndicates.

Asked if child sex tourism was a problem in Singapore, Mr Ong said it was not, and that enforcement agencies were working to ensure the Republic did not become a transit point for human traffickers.