

Shock would-be child sex tourists into saying 'no'

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Review - Insight

Susan Long

921 Words

28 May 2005

Straits Times

English

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WOULD it have made any difference to Darwis Rianto Lim if he had passed posters of dolls with bleeding genitals, warning against child sex tourism, as he sauntered towards his departure gate in Singapore?

Would the polytechnic lecturer - caught in a Bangkok hotel last month by Thai undercover cops after he allegedly posted messages on the Internet offering US\$200 (S\$329) for sex with a boy aged 12 to 16 - have looked away sheepishly? Or quickened his pace and walked on by?

When it comes to measures to curb child sex tourism, something heartening has emerged this past month.

Gone is Singapore's stock - and many say smug - insistence that child sex and human trafficking are 'not a problem' here.

For a while now, the authorities have strenuously maintained that, unlike in neighbouring countries, there is 'no evidence' of child prostitution or women being forced into the sex trade in Singapore.

As if, if it happens anywhere but here, then the problem is not really our problem. It's someone else's problem - for them, not us - to deal with. Or maybe it's just a problem with semantics and the popular understanding of 'trafficking'.

Last August, on that basis, the Government challenged a United States State Department report, which stated Singapore had a 'significant trafficking problem'.

Of late, in a helpful shift from the former denial stance, Singapore has joined ranks with Asean officials to craft an Asean Travellers' Code to fight child sex tourism in the region.

In another about-turn, just days after Senior Minister of State (Law and Home Affairs) Ho Peng Kee stressed the practical difficulties of extending jurisdiction against child sex overseas, the Home Affairs Ministry announced it was studying the feasibility of such a law.

Meanwhile, a recent Johns Hopkins University study surfaced that an estimated 600 Singaporean men go to Batam each weekend for sex with girls as young as 14.

Singaporeans now make up the largest number of sex tourists on Indonesia's Riau Islands and - sharing the 'honour' with Malaysians - in southern Thailand too.

According to Ms Saleemah Ismail of Unifem Singapore: 'These men travel there because it is cheaper than Singapore. For \$50, a man can engage a sex worker's services for 24 hours, with no limit to the number of sexual acts.'

Indeed, a 48-year-old Singaporean hawker, fresh from a weekend Batam trip, raved: 'Not only are they young, but they are also eager to please and easy to please. Unlike Singapore women who want the sky and the moon, these Batam girls will treat you like a king.'

But Ms Saleemah estimates that one-third of Batam's sex workers are below 18, with some as young as 12.

'A growing number of children enter prostitution to help their families. Child prostitutes can earn 10 to 20 times more than what an unskilled factory worker earns,' she observed.

While Unifem used to focus on rehabilitating exploited women in Batam's sex trade, it is

now trying to stem the demand from Singaporeans by appealing to the public to report those who engage in child prostitution to the police or Unifem (Tel: 6238-6761).

According to the Johns Hopkins report, most Singaporeans are 'situational' - rather than 'preferential' - sex tourists.

Unlike preferential sex tourists, situational ones do not deliberately travel to poor countries to buy child sex.

But when presented with the opportunity while travelling, most think 'Why not?' and consider sex a 'fun parenthesis' to their trip.

Most have elaborate justifications for their behaviour - that holiday sex is not an exploitative practice, that women and children in the sex industry 'chose it for themselves' and that they are just 'helping' ease the victims out of poverty.

According to a report by non-governmental organisation Ecpat (short for End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes), these disturbing views stem from racism and 'strong views about the inferiority of people other than their own, with no scruples about exploiting other persons as long as they consider them to be inferior'.

One common rationalisation here is that moves to curb demand from Singapore will probably continue to be hampered by poverty and corruption in the destination countries. Yes, the root causes of child sex tourism, such as lack of education and unemployment, need to be addressed first.

And yes, destination countries need to shape up.

But their lack of action is no excuse for ours.

Countries of origin like Singapore must do more to issue stern warnings about the legal and health risks of having sex with minors abroad and rope in everyone - from airlines to airports, tour operators to travel agencies, customs officials to civic groups - in its campaign.

For example, since 1993, travel agencies in France have been sticking leaflets in their customers' tickets warning them against child prostitution.

Last year, the Brazilian government began awarding hotels which actively discourage child sex on their premises an extra star in their quality rating.

Will such efforts be enough to make Singapore's 'preferential' sex tourists and paedophiles turn back?

Probably not. But it could make a difference to 'situational' sex tourists.

Grave warnings on immigration forms and at immigration checkpoints - plus the open admission that we have a problem - could turn their still-too-casual 'Why not?' into a more considered 'Better not'.

The writer is editor of the Saturday Special Report.