

Many child-sex tourists are married

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INDONESIAN teen Yani thought she was on her way to Jakarta to be a maid. Instead, the agent who promised her the job sold her to a brothel in Batam.

The 15-year-old was forced to have sex with men seeking cheap sex with young girls. They were mainly Singaporeans and Malaysians. She endured it for two weeks. Then she ran away.

Perhimpunan Rakan Anak Indonesia, the Indonesian non-governmental organisation (NGO) that took her in, said they get 10 such cases a month. The girls are usually aged 13 to 17. Another 10 a month involve migrant workers forced into the sex trade.

'Some run to the police; some come directly to our drop-in centre. Others jump into a taxi, and the driver helps them escape,' NGO worker Ramches Merdeka, 36, told The Straits Times.

The issue of child-sex offenders came under the spotlight at a three-day conference here to see how the demand for child-sex tourism and sex trafficking in Asia can be tackled and reduced. It ended on Wednesday.

Singaporean men largely fall into the 'situational sex offender' category, said Unifem (Singapore) president Melissa Kwee. This means they are in situations where a child is easily accessible to them. Or the situation allows them to delude themselves about the child's age.

For some, such sexual exploitation may be a 'once in a lifetime' act while on a holiday. For others, it may develop into a long-term pattern of abuse. The sexual preference for pre-pubescent children, or paedophilia, is not a crime in itself. 'It is the act of sex with a child that is a crime,' said Ms Kwee.

While exact statistics and profiles of offenders are hard to find, Unifem interviews and observations have found that 'many are married men; and many are older, blue-collar workers with an 'isteri simpanan' in Batam - or a prostitute who keeps herself for only one man,' she added.

In Thailand, Singaporean and Malaysian men, aged between 35 to 45, reportedly keep teenage students in Hat Yai as their mistresses. The Bangkok Post, in a December 2002 article, reported a lecturer at Prince of Songkhla University as saying that female students were popular because they were not considered high-risk when it came to HIV.

Mr Ramches also confirmed that most sex tourists prefer younger girls who, they believe, are less likely to have sex-related diseases. These girls are seen as easy prey as well because they tend to be naive and trusting.

A 35-year-old swimming instructor, who admitted he was a sex tourist eight years ago, told The Straits Times that it was cheap sex that drew him. 'For \$40, you can buy the services of a girl overnight. Virgins can cost up to \$500 a night,' said the divorcee and father of one who wanted to be known only as Mr Teo. He used to go to Batam with his former army buddies for sex.

'When men look for sex, they don't think about the girl. It's like: 'I give you money and you

give me what I want - full stop', he said. But he said he stopped when he found his sex partner was in her teens, and had been sold to the brothel by her parents. His friends, now blue-collared workers in their 30s, still frequent Batam for sex, he added.

Ms Lola Wagner, director of the Partnership for Health and Humanitarian Foundation in Batam - an NGO which counsels prostitutes - confirmed that Batam's sex entertainment scene was riddled with the trafficking of girls and women. 'It is very much a problem,' she said, adding that 'there are 83 entertainment outlets, with between 60 and 100 girls in each'.

Of the estimated 6,600 prostitutes, 3 per cent are under 18 years old, she said. 'Many are locked up in the brothels. They may owe their pimps lots of money, usually about five million rupiah (S\$870), for bringing them over and finding them jobs. If they run away, their families are threatened,' she said.