



Child-sex hunters in law's crosshairs; Overseas jaunts could result in stiff jail sentences

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SINGAPOREANS who go overseas to have sex with children could soon face the music at home after their jaunt.

In its current review of the Penal Code, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has recommended that any Singaporean or permanent resident who buys sexual services from a minor under the age of 18 in another country be prosecuted in Singapore, regardless of whether the act is legal in that country.

The proposed law will have sex-tour organisers on its radar as well.

"Apprehending a sex tourist removes only one person from the industry," said the MHA.

"Shutting down a child-sex tourism agency can block a far greater number of sex tourists."

Under the proposed law, those found guilty of buying sex from under-18s abroad face up to seven years in jail and a fine with no limit. Those convicted of organising child sex tours could face a similar fine and be jailed up to 10 years.

The new laws, if approved, will see Singapore join more than 30 countries that have similar laws.

The calls for child-sex tourism to be criminalised in Singapore have heightened over the past year. MPs raised the issue in the last Parliament, and non-governmental organisations have lobbied for it.

A Johns Hopkins University study released last year found that Singaporean men form the largest group of those who visit the Indonesian Riau Islands for sex with prostitutes, many of whom are under the age of 18.

Last April, polytechnic lecturer Darwis Rianto Lim was arrested by Thai police after he placed offers on the Internet to buy sex with teenaged boys in Thailand. Lim subsequently jumped bail and is now on the run.

But the MHA acknowledges there are constraints that come with the enforcement of extra-territorial laws. Language barriers and different local conditions can make it difficult to trace and interview foreign witnesses and gather evidence.

Ms Braema Mathi, chairperson of the women and children trafficking sub-committee at the Association of Women for Action and Research, suggested that a taskforce be set up within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to tackle this "borderless phenomena". She also proposed a hotline be set up to encourage Singaporeans to report such matters to authorities. "For this to be effective, all Singaporeans have to keep our eyes wide open to help," said Ms Mathi. What's significant, said Unifem Singapore's Saleemah Ismail, is that the country is taking a stand. The proposed law "sends a clear signal that such behaviour is unacceptable in our society. It represents where the nation stands on this issue", she said.