

Global Child Sex Tourism

The purpose of this paper is to educate the public about child sex tourism – a form of commercial sexual exploitation of children and a ubiquitous practice that has perilous implications for both children and society throughout the world.

Contributing author Susan Song is a Senior Program Assistant with Youth Advocate Program International in Washington, D.C.



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Children as Tourist Attractions

by Susan Song

Dr. Jerry Albom is a middle-aged radiologist from Oklahoma, USA. Before starting his new position at a medical practice on the island of Guam, Dr. Albom decided to take a trip to Asia – one of his favorite and most frequented travel destinations. His family, friends, and patients back home know Dr. Albom to be a loving son, loyal friend, respectable doctor, and a hard-working individual deserving of his recent getaway to an exotic locale. Unfortunately, this was no ordinary man and this was not a traditional vacation. Dr. Albom is a child sex tourist; he traveled halfway across the world to Cambodia (where one-third of an estimated 800,000 prostitutes are children) to have sex with a child.¹

Dr. Albom is one of thousands of adults who travel overseas every year to sexually exploit children, some as young as five years old. The United Nations defines child sex tourism as “tourism organized with the primary purpose of facilitating the effecting of a commercial-sexual relationship with a child.”²

In addition, child sex tourism may include “the opportunistic use of prostituted children in regions while traveling on business or for other purposes.”³ Thus, while sex tourists like Dr. Albom are considered “preferential” tourists (traveling abroad with the primary intent of having sex with children), there are “situational” or “opportunistic” offenders who exploit children during a business trip or vacation getaway simply out of convenience.⁴ Nevertheless, both are criminals, here and abroad.

Child sex tourism (CST) is a type of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), along with child prostitution, pornography, and sex trafficking. CSEC, CST in particular, is a lucrative and ubiquitous practice affecting an estimated 2 million children worldwide, every year.⁵

According to ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child

Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes), one of the first organizations dedicated to ending the commercial sexual exploitation of children, child sex tourism is especially prevalent in Asia, and Central and South America. Thailand, Cambodia, and Costa Rica are among the most popular sex tourist destinations.⁶

The majority of sex tourists are adult males from more industrialized countries who travel to lesser developed countries where laws are weakly enforced and sex is cheap and readily available. According to recent reports, Americans comprise an estimated 25% of all sex tourists.⁷ Yet 38% of sex tourists in Cambodia and 80% of sex tourists in Costa Rica are American.⁸ Other major “source countries” include Japan and Australia. While the crisis is more pronounced in the aforementioned regions, tourists from nearly every country in the world finance the sex industry and fuel the demand for young children – especially young girls.

Today, the number of children who are victims of sex tourism continues to rise. Although child sex tourism has existed for decades, the practice has exploded in recent years due in large part to the rapid globalization of trade and the growth of the tourist industry. As countries once insulated now open their borders to global markets, and as airfares become more affordable to consumers, sex offenders find new opportunities and easier means to travel abroad for underage sex.⁹

Additionally, inter-linked social and technological factors, such as the lack of education, the discrimination against girl-children, widespread poverty, poor law enforcement, political corruption, and advances in information sharing through Internet technology have each exacerbated the problem.¹⁰

In many countries, for example, the lack of political will and the abundance of corruption among government and law enforcement officials – those very figures who are entrusted with positions of leadership and privilege – undermine efforts to enact stronger laws and harsher punishments for perpetrators of child sex crimes. As a result, in countries where corruption is rampant, public officials are often part of the problem rather than part of the solution. A new report released by the

humanitarian organization World Vision - Cambodia, indicates that “many high-ranking officers [in the Cambodian Ministry of Tourism] are involved in child sex tourism and the sexual exploitation of children” and even “support the activities” of child sex traffickers.¹¹ In Cambodia and in other countries facing a similar situation, bribery, corruption, ignorance and apathy prevail. For the right price, the most perceptive will turn blind. Meanwhile, sex tourists and tour operators are left to freely cross borders, prey on innocence, and victimize thousands of children with relative impunity.

Child trafficking and child sex tourism is a lucrative multi-billion dollar industry that fuels avarice and corruption while attracting organized crime syndicates and transnational trafficking networks.¹² Further complicating the problem, many impoverished countries rely on sex trafficking as a source of real income and, in effect, often have a vested interest in maintaining the status-quo. A recent report from the ILO, *The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Basis of Prostitution in Southeast Asia*, found that in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, the “sex sector” accounts for anywhere between 2 to 14 percent of national income. Child sex tourism accounts for up to half of that revenue.¹³ Thus poverty and avarice provide a context in which children are highly vulnerable to exploitation.

The rapid expansion of the internet has also fueled the sex tourism industry by facilitating the booking of international flights, tours, and accommodations while offering virtual anonymity. Sex tour organizers also use the internet to distribute child pornography and advertise sex tours.

Dateline NBC recently conducted an undercover investigation of CSEC in Cambodia (the same investigation that caught Dr. Albom on hidden cameras), and aired the special report on primetime television. After being shown a tape of the episode entitled “Children for Sale”, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed his personal disgust for child sex tourists and described why CSEC is a particular concern for the Secretary of State:

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Child Rights Spotlight: CSEC in Japan

In 1998, Interpol estimated that nearly 80% of the world's Internet-based child pornography websites originated in Japan.¹⁹ Although the Japanese government passed legislation in 1999 that effectively cracked down on child pornography providers, Japan continues to be a major producer and patron of child sex tourism.

In a recent press conference to announce the release of the State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report which analyzes human trafficking worldwide and documents governments' responses to it, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Director John Miller both expressed their particular disappointment with Japan – a country which, despite the immense resources available to it, was failing to take appropriate steps to end child sex tourism and other forms of human exploitation. As one of the largest economies in the world, Director Miller censured, Japan's lackluster response is impermissible: "Japan does not comply with the minimum standards. We believe that there has been a tremendous gap in Japan that has a huge problem with slavery – particularly sex slavery – a tremendous gap between the size of the problem and the resources and efforts devoted to addressing the problem."²⁰

Based on its unsatisfactory performance in the year since the last report, Japan accordingly descended from Tier 2 to the Tier 2 Watch List Category. According to the State Department, countries placed in the Tier 2 Watch List are in danger of falling to the lowest category, Tier 3, at which point they may be subject to U.S. sanctions and denied special privileges.²¹

Although considerable progress has been made in the global fight to end child sex tourism, particularly in the past few years, the situation in Japan reaffirms the sense of urgency and vigilance that is required of world leaders in order to effectively protect children from what Secretary of State Powell condemns as "the most heinous of crimes."²² ❖

"How can we turn away? If we want to have friends in the world, if we want to have better relations with the countries of the world, we have to help them with this kind of problem... So, as the Secretary of State, why is the Secretary of State worried about trafficking in persons? Because it deals with foreign policy. It deals with economic and social development within that country. And a country that does not treasure its youth and protect its youth is not going to be moving in the right direction in the 21st century...and a nation such as ours, which says we are a moral nation, and that we have a value system...we wouldn't be living up to our values if we didn't do something about it."¹⁴

While the practice of child sex tourism can erode the economic, social, and moral integrity of a nation, the greatest victims are, of course, the defenseless children: their voices unheard, their stories untold, their plight implacable, and their innocence stolen. They must endure the immediate and long-term emotional, psychological, and physical impact of sexual exploitation. To make matters even worse, in countries with limited educational opportunities, people are ill-informed of the health risks and the severe long-term psychological harm that is inflicted on children who are sexually exploited. In fact, some sex offenders are motivated by a belief that it is safer to have sex with a child or that they will be cured of disease if they have sex with a child (the so-called "virgin cure"). But in truth, children are more susceptible to HIV and other STDs.¹⁵ Such misinformation has perilous implications not only for the child but for the global AIDS epidemic as well.

Perhaps even more disturbing, however, is the nature of how many of these children are forced into the sex trade. Although the family is traditionally a child's first line of defense, in some cases children are sold into the sex trade by someone they know and trust. Desperate families hoping for a better life for their children may be duped by "pimps and madams" who are known to abuse and drug children into submission¹⁶. But in the worst cases, neighbors, friends, and even close relatives knowingly sell these children into the sex trade. Abandoned, afraid, and abused, these children lose all bonds of trust and often find their only comfort in addictive, mind-altering drugs as they succumb to a life of emotional, psychological, and physical entrapment. The few lucky ones who do escape often return to their communities only to find that they are stigmatized as unclean and swiftly ostracized for their past occupation.

Clearly then, this is a pervasive problem that cannot be ignored. In addition to the direct harm inflicted on children, child sex tourism has damaging

implications for all fabrics of society: global health, economy, education, and security. Fortunately, worldwide interest and public awareness of the issue are growing.

International conventions and various working groups focused on child sexual exploitation and child sex tourism offer a slight glimmer of hope in the campaign to end CSEC. The first and most comprehensive international effort to focus on the protection and rights of children is the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Ratified by all but two of the world's countries, the CRC is the most widely adopted treaty in history. Notably, the CRC includes several Articles pertaining specifically to the sexual exploitation of children.

Since 1989, additional international, regional, and national legal instruments and monitoring mechanisms have been adopted. For instance, in 1999, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 devised and coordinated efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor including the sale and trafficking of children, as well as the exploitation of children for both prostitution and pornography. In 1990, a U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography was appointed by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR). And in 2000 an Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography was introduced.

International campaigns aimed specifically at combating sex tourism have also been launched. In 2004, the World Tourism Organization (WTO), ECPAT and UNICEF spearheaded a new campaign to encourage North American travel firms to sign and abide by a "code of conduct." By signing the code, hotel and travel companies commit themselves to establish a corporate policy against CSEC, train personnel to recognize forms of CSEC, and provide relevant information to travelers.¹⁷ Also in 2004, World Vision partnered with U.S. government agencies to launch the Child Sex Tourism Prevention Project - a global campaign to deter sex tourists through in-flight ads and brochures, airport billboards, and other messages that warn potential sex tourists that they can and will be prosecuted. While some experts

doubt that such deterrent campaigns will be effective against the most "preferential" pedophiles, the campaigns may make other potential sex tourists reconsider their actions.

Many countries have also developed national plans of action or strengthened existing laws against CSEC. Responding to mounting pressure from child welfare agencies and human rights groups, the United States under the Bush administration passed the PROTECT Act in April 2003 and affirmed its commitment to ending the sexual exploitation of children. The act established stricter laws that make it illegal for U.S. citizens and residents to travel to another country to have sex with a minor (or conspire to do so). Prior to April 2003, U.S. prosecutors had to prove that the accused traveled abroad with the *intent* to have sex with a minor. This is no longer the case. Under the new act, any individual who attempted to or engaged in sex with a minor is subject to a maximum prison sentence of 30 years - double the previous penalty. Moreover, child sex tour operators and co-conspirators are now also held accountable and subject to the same penalty.¹⁸

Although child sex tourism is a complex and difficult issue to solve, one thing is clear: the disturbing practice of child sex tourism will not relent any time soon unless drastic steps are taken and a sustained, coordinated commitment is made by governments, law enforcement agencies, private companies, and all sectors of civil society to galvanize social awareness, strengthen and enforce laws, reach workable solutions, and fight the root causes of child sex tourism. As for the sex tourists with their multitude of excuses - pleading ignorance of local laws and customs, adhering to myths of the "virgin cure," justifying actions based on so-called philanthropic intentions, etc. - the global community must pressure their leaders and hold their governments accountable for acting morally, lawfully, and courageously to punish these offenders and put an end to the crisis. Until then, the millions of children entangled in the global sex trade can only wait in silent hope.

For his part, when confronted with Dateline NBC's secret videotape documenting his crimes, Dr. Albom explained that he must have been "drunk or

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slipped a pill.”¹⁹ He is currently under investigation by Homeland Security agents for his activities in Cambodia. ❖

Endnotes

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