

Central America Now Draws More Sex Tourists

By Marwaan Macan-Markar

YOKOHAMA, Japan—Due to a lack of political will and weak laws, Central American countries are fast replacing Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and the Philippines as the most sought-after destination of sex tourists, according to regional experts.

This makes the children of Central America and their peers in nearby Mexico among the most vulnerable in the world, they told reporters during the release of the first regional report from Central America and Mexico on commercial sexual exploitation of children.

“The sex tourists look for elements like impunity for sex crimes and anonymity, and they are guaranteed such features in Central America,” Bruce Harris, executive director of the San Jose-based child rights lobby Casa Alianza, said at the launch of the report.

“The sex tourists come from the United States, Canada, Germany, Chile and Europe,” he added.

According to the 113-page report, issued on the third afternoon of the Second World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children here, Central American girls, some as young as 12 to 15 years old, are easily available for clients in local brothels.

In Nicaragua, for instance,

“erotic massages are performed by young women who are offered, as if they were merchandise, at a cost of 100 to 400 cordobas per hour (about US\$8 to US\$32),” states the report “Investigation on the Trafficking, Sex Tourism, Pornography and Prostitution of Children in Central America and Mexico.”

In Honduras, “children from poor villages are being kidnapped and forced into the sex trade,” it reveals. “There have been more than 500 disappearances recorded, most of them related to the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.”

In Guatemala City, the country’s capital, the report’s authors point to the more than 2,000 boys and girls trapped in the sex industry. “In Tecun Uman, San Marcos, mainly because this is a border area, raped girls are left available to recruiters for prostitution.”

The report, which was produced after a year-long study of Central America’s five countries and Mexico, notes that Costa Rica has received a substantially high number of sex tourists because it is being promoted

as a pedophile’s playground.

“There are around 40 direct (web) pages promoting it as a sex tourist destination and there are more than 30 indirect pages,” it added.

“Weak laws have enabled the exploiters to get away,” said Sean Ferrer, chairman of the Audrey Hepburn Children’s Fund that teamed up with Casa Alianza to produce the report. “The pedophiles are more successful in Central America.”

This lapse is highlighted in another report released ahead of the Yokohama congress by the international child rights lobby End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT).

Only Mexico has produced a national plan of action to combat child sexual exploitation, following a pledge made at the first world congress in Stockholm, Sweden in 1996, according to the ECPAT study.

Governments have still to display the kind of commitment needed to quell the commercial sexual exploitation of youngsters—the type that has made a difference in Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and the Philippines.

There, strong laws and government interventions have put child sex abusers on notice that they

will be prosecuted if caught, states ECPAT's report, "Five Years After Stockholm."

"This is unacceptable," said Harris. "If there is no action plan, there is little evidence of a budget to crack down on commercial sexual exploitation of children. The problem is not a lack of resources but a lack of distribution of the resources."

A government delegate from Central America attending the congress admitted that the countries have not done enough for their children. "It is a pity. There is awareness, but five years after Stockholm we have few concrete measures to show," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"When allocating public funds, programmes to combat this perversion are not a priority," he confirmed. "The sex exploiters are getting away."

For Ines Maria Dias, a 22-year-old Brazilian student attending the Yokohama congress as part of the Latin American youth representatives here, the situation in Central America reflects a disturbing trend about national policies on child sexual exploitation.

"Either there are no laws to stop such abuse or implementation of the laws is lacking," she said.

"Governments cannot ignore the way children, girls and boys, are being

sexually exploited in Latin America. Domestic sexual violence is among them," Dias asserted.

However, the conference participants were also given some hint about the positive interventions to combat sexual abuse in the region, among them an effort led by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In January 2002, El Salvador will serve as the springboard for a programme in Latin America that seeks to stop commercial sexual exploitation of children through a "time-bound programme."

"Between 3,000 and 4,000 child prostitutes in El Salvador have been identified by the ILO to participate in this effort," Panudda Boonpala, a senior programme officer at the ILO, said of the four-year programme that seeks to remove children from the sex trade and provide them with an alternative.

"This is the way forward," Panudda said of the five million U.S. dollar ILO project.

This ILO effort, which comes after a comprehensive study of the circumstances that force children into the sex trade and why they remain in it, has already been tried in northern Thailand with a measure of success.

Source: Inter Press Service, 19 December 2001

continued from p. 10...Female Genital capital of Dakar recently.

Female genital cutting, also known as female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM) involves the alteration or cutting of the female genitalia, usually, for social rather than medical reasons, is a widespread practice in Senegal and 27 other sub-Saharan African countries.

Only ten countries in Africa have outlawed the practice. Through migration, FGC also has spread to Europe and other parts of the world.

The FGC term, according to the U.S.-based Population Reference Bureau, is being used by reproductive health scholars as a more neutral term to replace the more judgmental FGM term, used by women's rights groups to emphasise the damage caused by the practice.

Senegal, also this year's venue for the Population Institute Global Media Awards, which presented awards to six individuals and media organisations for their efforts in highlighting global population and reproductive health issues, was chosen for its success in fighting the female genital cutting.

Inter Press Service (IPS) received the award for the most conscientious news service in "fostering support to solve the world population crisis through a demonstrated commitment to share ideas, knowledge and experience towards...creating a better quality of life for all the world's people."

Source: Inter Press Service, 17 December 2001