

Child Sex Tourism

By David Hechler

Child sex tourism is not new. For years pedophiles¹ seeking to avoid severe punishment in the United States have taken trips to countries where prostituted children are plentiful and sexual abuse laws are lenient or unenforced or (with the help of a bribe or two) easily circumvented.

The subject crops up regularly in pedophile newsletters. One article that appeared in the *NAMBLA Bulletin*, the newsletter of the North American Man/Boy Love Association² rhapsodized about a 12-year-old Asian boy who, the anonymous author assured readers, "truly loved his work." The writer went on to advise:

Weigh the pros and cons of becoming involved yourself in sex tourism overseas. Seek and find love from American boys on a platonic, purely emotional level. For sexual satisfaction, travel once or twice yearly overseas. You might get arrested overseas for patronizing a boy prostitute. But the legal consequences of being caught patronizing a boy prostitute in a friendly place overseas will be less severe.³

There is evidence that many have heeded this advice:

- A pedophile was advised by friends to go to Asia, where "thousands of kids were there just for the picking." He attended a NAMBLA meeting and afterward confided to a member, "I want to go to Thailand, but I don't know how to set it up." "No problem," he was told. "I'll give you a contact who can arrange everything." A few weeks later he was in bed with one of those children "there ... for the picking."

The pedophile made many more trips to Southeast Asia before he was caught. He is currently serving a 30-year sentence. But he sits in an American prison for sexually abusing American children. He has never been prosecuted for his activities abroad.⁴

- A physics teacher at New York City's prestigious Bronx High School of Science acknowledged during a television interview that he was an active member of NAMBLA. Though the teacher vowed he had never broken the law—and apparently has never been arrested—the school district's subsequent investigation revealed that the teacher had told an undercover investigator he'd had sex with a boy in the Philippines.⁵

- A convicted child molester, after his release from prison, enjoyed telling children in his neighborhood that the boys he had "hired" in Thailand charged only \$8 or \$9. He was considering moving there, he added shortly before he disappeared, to take advantage of that country's "more mature cultural attitudes."⁶

The World Discovers a Plague

Though child sex tourism is not new, only in the last few years has it been discussed in the mainstream media. As Chuan Leekpai, Prime Minister of Thailand, told an international conference on the child sex trade in June 1994:

[T]his problem has not arisen just in the last year or two. It started long ago, but in the past it was not taken as a serious matter. The world didn't pay much attention to it; there was no organization working on this problem; there was no governmental policy, either written or spoken, regarding this problem and there was no international traffic of prostitutes from one country to another. However, all these things have now occurred and Thailand (like other countries in the region) must face the problem.⁷

One of the reasons Thailand was forced to confront this issue was the founding of the organization to which Prime Minister Chuan referred. The organization is ECPAT, an acronym for End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism. Founded in 1991, within three years ECPAT had established offices and support groups in more than two dozen countries.⁸ It chose to focus on "four countries in Asia where the situation seemed worst—Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand."⁹

Thailand, where ECPAT is headquartered, has drawn the most attention.¹⁰ By all accounts, the rapid growth of that country's tourism and sex industries began in the 1960s.¹¹ By 1993, one Thai professor estimated that the sex trade brought in \$1.5 billion annually.¹²

The travel industry and the Thai government have overtly promoted sex tourism. When the Tourism Authority of Thailand dubbed 1987 "Visit Thailand Year," its slogan was: "The one fruit of Thailand more delicious than durian [a native fruit]—its young women."¹³ In England, a travel brochure referred to Thais as "Peter Pans—eternal children who have never grown up" and "the most sensual and overtly sexual [people] on earth." Promoting a trip to Pattaya, Thailand's major sex resort, the brochure added:

If you can suck it, use it, eat it, feel it, taste it, abuse it or see it, then it's available in this resort that truly never sleeps. Pattaya is not for prudes.¹⁴

Another promotion that was widely publicized appeared in the form of a "postcard" in an Austrian airline's in-flight magazine. This advertisement contained an even more blatant appeal to pedophiles. "From Thailand with Love," read the caption on the front, illustrated by a drawing of a prepubescent girl naked from the waist up. The back of the card, signed by a group of supposed travelers, praised the cornucopia of sexual pleasures they were enjoying around town.

"Got to close now," the card concludes. "The tarts in the Bangkok Baby Club are waiting for us."¹⁵

One Million Children Prostituted Worldwide

Just how many children are prostituted in Thailand and the rest of Asia? There is no way to know. The prostitution of children is at least nominally illegal in the countries ECPAT monitors,¹⁶ so there can be no official count. However, ECPAT has compiled what it considers to be conservative estimates based on the available information [see chart]. The numbers are shocking—60,000 children in the Philippines, 200,000 in Thailand, one million worldwide.¹⁷ But ECPAT doesn't dwell on them. It has tried, instead, to reveal the people behind the statistics.

In 1984, five young girls who had been imprisoned in a Thai brothel were burned to death in a fire. Later it was revealed why they never had a chance: they had been chained to their beds.¹⁸

The reality for children in Thai brothels—whether or not they are shackled—is that they are indeed slaves.¹⁹ Many are from small villages far from Bangkok—so many, in fact, that some entire villages are devoid of young girls.²⁰ Some are kidnapped by pimps or middlemen who sell them. In other cases, parents are tricked by brothel owners, who promise children educational opportunities, or attractive jobs, in Bangkok. In still other instances, parents sell their children outright or indenture them by accepting "loans" against their children's future earnings (the nature of which the parents may or may not understand). If parents later suspect the worst, they don't have the resources to locate and rescue their distant children.²¹

Once they are warehoused in the brothels, the captured children have this in common: their lives are completely controlled by their "employers," who often enforce their will with violence.²²

For this reason, the term *child prostitute* is really a misnomer. These children have been prostituted—and the responsibility lies solely with their exploiters. For adults, prostitution may be a career choice, and some may call it a "victimless crime." But for children in sexual servitude, there is no choice—and *they* are the victims.

Enter the AIDS Epidemic

Aside from the physical and psychological damage these children suffer,²³ they face the increasing likelihood that they will be infected with HIV. "AIDS is now sweeping across Asia at a pace at least as rapid as the virus took in its 1980-85 race across Africa," World Health Organization officials reported in August 1994, at the 10th International Conference on AIDS.²⁴ Thailand, for obvious reasons, has been particularly hard hit. Estimates vary, but a conservative guess is that at least 500,000 of its people were infected with HIV in 1994 and, by the year 2000, the number will have soared to at least 2.5 million.²⁵

Fear of AIDS has proved a windfall for child sex tour operators who, alert to the tourists' anxieties, advertise the youngest children as the safest. They assure nervous customers that the children have regular checkups and that you can't catch AIDS from a child. Neither claim is true.²⁶

AIDS, and the relentless siphoning of children from the villages, have depleted the brothels' supply. This, in turn, has sent brothel owners scouring the region for fresh sources. The result has been trafficking across national borders. Human Rights Watch has exhaustively documented the kidnapping of Burmese women and girls who are deposited in Thai brothels.²⁷ ECPAT has also noted parallel trails from China and Laos.²⁸

Searching for Signs of Progress

Yet, even in the face of this reality, ECPAT points to evidence of progress. Sometimes this progress is measured in small increments: an article here, a conference there, a speech like Prime Minister Chuan's.

Sometimes there are larger signs. Australia, Germany and the United States have recently passed laws that allow prosecution of child sex tourists upon their return home.²⁹ Norway and Sweden already had such laws on the books and have demonstrated a desire to use them.³⁰

Still, it is far from certain that these laws will prove effective. A law professor assessed the prospects of Australia's legislation as it neared enactment:

The enactment of such legislation will be an important symbolic and political statement. However, there is a real danger that, if the legislation is not accompanied by effective enforcement measures at the national and international level, its promises could turn out to be rather hollow.... Prosecuting a sexual offence where a child has been the victim is a difficult enough task in any event; when it is further complicated by the problems of obtaining evidence in a foreign country, ensuring the willingness of witnesses to testify in that country where proceedings are conducted in a foreign language, that task becomes even more onerous. Furthermore, the reasons for the lack of effective enforcement of local laws in certain countries may also result in a lack of the close law enforcement cooperation needed to put together a case of this sort.³¹

Some of the staunchest supporters of the Australian law concede that it would be preferable for child sex tourists to be prosecuted in the countries where they commit the crimes.³² What's more, shortly before these laws were passed, there was optimism that Thailand and its neighbors would strengthen their own laws and—at long last—enforce them. Prime Minister Chuan himself announced in 1992 that he intended to wipe out the child sex trade "in the next two or three months."³³

Nearly two years later, at an ECPAT conference in Bangkok, the prime minister was forced to acknowledge failure. Once again he declared his hope that he could eradicate the prostitution of Thai children while acknowledging, with surprising candor, what critics had been saying for years: that Thai officials not only condone the practice but, in his words, "[s]ome officials even sponsor this kind of business and share the profits."³⁴

Planning for the Future

Despite such setbacks, ECPAT officials appear undaunted. Their plans include: expanding the scope of their program to include Africa, Latin America and other affected regions; providing direct support to local organizations working to heal children who have escaped from prostitution and to safeguard those at risk; convening an international congress in 1996 to seek ways to end the child sex trade; developing a comprehensive database that incorporates new research.

In general, ECPAT has chosen to avoid confrontation. It has pursued change by lobbying government officials and by educating the public—largely through the media and through leafleting campaigns arranged with the cooperation of legitimate representatives of the tourism industry. ECPAT has also led a major push to secure U.S. ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United States, which helped draft the document, was one of only 15 countries (as of August 1994) that had neither signed nor ratified it. Ironically, even Thailand is a party to the Convention.³⁵

Critics Tire of Waiting

Not everyone is satisfied with ECPAT's approach—or with the effort of the U.S. government, which so far has been limited to passage of the law that permits prosecution of child sex tourists when they return.

Dorothy Thomas advocates a more aggressive campaign. Thomas is the Human Rights Watch project director who oversaw the investigation of trafficking of Burmese women and children into Thailand. Testifying before a House Subcommittee, Thomas was sharply critical of the U.S. State Department's classification of forced prostitution in Thailand as "discrimination" rather than slavery or forced labor. This was, she explained, much more than a semantic quibble. The classification "exempts this abuse from consideration under section 502 of the Trade Act, which obligates the U.S. Trade Representative to review workers' rights when deciding which countries to designate as U.S. trade beneficiaries." A moment later she continued:

[T]he State Department has documented the complicity of Thai police and border officials in trafficking of women and girls from neighboring countries into Thailand for forced prostitution since 1991. Meanwhile, the U.S. has and is continuing to provide police training and [to] sell arms and equipment to the Thai police, including the border police, without ever investigating their involvement in trafficking and forced prostitution.³⁶

When there have been police crackdowns, the main target, Thomas said, "has been the trafficking victims themselves.

In virtually every case that we investigated, the women and girls were apprehended while the brothel owners, pimps, procurers and customers remain free. Moreover, despite clear evidence of official complicity and even direct

involvement, we know of no case where a police officer was prosecuted for involvement in trafficking and forced prostitution specifically.³⁷

At a minimum, Thomas argued, aid to the Thai police³⁸ should be contingent on "progress towards prosecuting and convicting culpable members within their ranks. ... Not only aid," she concluded, "but also U.S. trade relationships with Thailand should be subject to the same vigorous concern for Thai official complicity in the traffic of women and girls."³⁹

The Threat of International Pressure

Demands like these have not been lost on Prime Minister Chuan, who by early 1993 had sensed a change in public perception. "Prostitution in Thailand, particularly child prostitution, has reached a state where it is not acceptable to both the country and the international community," he observed. "The prostitution problem also leads to other problems such as international pressure not to buy goods from countries where children are exploited."⁴⁰

A call for the boycott the prime minister so feared was trumpeted a few months later in an American magazine. The final paragraph was a virtual call-to-arms:

Thai sex-tourist trade is highly dependent on foreign patrons and vulnerable to an international boycott. ... A concerted organized and well publicized campaign against child prostitution including a boycott of airlines, travel agencies, hotel chains, and others involved in tourism to Thailand could have a major impact. ... An international commission of Western notables holding hearings and investigating the violation of the rights of children could provide the necessary publicity to spark the boycott.⁴¹

For the Children, Nothing Has Changed

To date, however, this declaration of war seems to have had no greater effect⁴² than Prime Minister Chuan's pronouncement that he would quickly end the problem. In fact, *no* one's words or actions seem to have had much effect.

The prostitution of children is more widely publicized than ever before, and more people are working to destroy it each year. But for the victims, precious little seems to have changed. And the promised end is nowhere in sight.

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NOTES

1. Not all pedophiles are child molesters. While all are sexually attracted to children, only some choose to act on their impulses. These might be called *predatory pedophiles*. In the interest of brevity, however, in this article they are called simply pedophiles.
2. Though NAMBLA is probably the best known pedophile organization, pedophiles who prefer girls have their own associations and newsletters. *Uncommon Desires*, for example, is a newsletter that describes itself as "the voice of an emerging politically-conscious [sic] girl-love underground."
3. Anon., "Letter to a Young Boy-Lover." *NAMBLA Bulletin*, Jan./Feb. 1993, p. 30.
4. Ehrlich, P., "Asia's Shocking Secret." *Reader's Digest*, Oct. 1993, pp. 71-2.
5. Gearty, R., "Cortines: Ax Pedophile." (New York) *Daily News*, Sept. 22, 1993.
6. Speyer, R., "Freed Molester Pestered Me, Sez Boy." (New York) *Daily News*, Aug. 8, 1994.
7. Speech of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai of Thailand, as reported in: End child prostitution: report of an international consultation on child prostitution held in Bangkok June 13 and 14, 1994. Published by ECPAT, 1994.
8. End child prostitution, p. 9.
9. O'Grady, R., *The Child and the Tourist* (Bangkok: ECPAT, 1992 in association with Auckland, New Zealand: Pace Publishing, 1992), p. 132.
10. Thailand is often used by journalists, sociologists and political scientists as a case study of sex tourism. As Prime Minister Chuan himself pointed out, the Thai press has a good deal of freedom—as do foreign correspondents working in Thailand. The same cannot be said of all countries in the region. Furthermore, reporters and scholars in Thailand have taken advantage of the opportunity. Their published work, in turn, makes the country that much more attractive to colleagues, who can build on this foundation.
11. See, for example, Sachs, A., "The Last Commodity: Child Prostitution in the Developing World." *World Watch* (July/Aug. 1994): 28. It is important to add that the expansion of the sex trade was due not simply to tourism but to increasing local demand as well. See O'Grady, *Child* (1992), pp. 96-7.

12. Ireland, K., "Wish You Weren't Here: The Sexual Exploitation of Children and the Connection with Tourism and International Travel." Working paper of Save the Children (London), Sept. 1993, p. 31.
13. Ireland, pp. 45-6.
14. Ireland, p. 51. The brochure was published by Redwing Holidays.
15. O'Grady, R., *The Rape of the Innocent* (Bangkok: ECPAT, 1994 in association with Auckland, New Zealand: Pace Publishing, 1994): 54. The airline was Lauda Air, owned by former race car driver Niki Lauda.
16. O'Grady, *Child* (1992), pp. 91-109.
17. This statistic—one million children worldwide—is derived, as the chart indicates, from a 1988 estimate by the Norwegian government. During a 1994 conference, ECPAT presented its own estimate that one million children were prostituted in Asia alone. See End child prostitution, p. 10.
18. Ireland, p. 34.
19. O'Grady, *Child* (1992), chapter 3: "Little Children", pp. 39-54; and O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), chapter 2: "Children in Slavery," pp. 11-22. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines *slavery*, in part, as "submissiveness to a dominating influence: subservience" and "control by imposed authority: subjection."
20. Ireland, p. 34.
21. The plight of such parents was illustrated by on-camera interviews in the *BBC* documentary "Dying for Sex" (1993), produced by Giselle Portenier and reported by Peter Godwin.
22. *A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993). See also Note 19.
23. O'Grady, *Child and Tourist* (1992), pp. 115-119.
24. Garrett, L., "Covert Sex Practices Put Asians at Risk." *New York Newsday*, Aug. 16, 1994.
25. O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), pp. 78-9. To put these numbers in context, Thailand's population is about 55 million, of whom 6 million live in Bangkok. (Source: *Thailand* [Knopf Guides] [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993]: p. 314.)
26. O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), pp. 76-8. See also Garrett (Note 24) who, referring to reports presented at the 10th International Conference on AIDS, writes: "Fear of AIDS is now driving an active trade in Burmese girls, who are sold by their parents to Thai brothel brokers. Thai men believe these girls—who are usually sold as virgins—are HIV-safe. Of course, these women, according to reports at the conference, eventually catch HIV from their clients and return to Burma, taking the virus with them."
27. *Modern Form of Slavery*.
28. O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), pp. 29-31. ECPAT has also documented trafficking in the reverse direction. Thai children are sold to brothels in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia and the United States, among other countries.
29. Australia's Crimes (Child Sex Tourism) Amendment Act 1994 became law in July 1994; Germany's amendment to x5 of the Penal Code took effect in June 1993; and the U.S. Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Act of 1994 was part of the Crime Bill signed into law in September 1994.

30. O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), pp. 97-99.
31. Byrnes, A., "Extraterritorial Criminal Legislation Against the Sexual Exploitation of Children by Australians Abroad." Paper presented at First World Congress on Family Law and Children's Rights, Sydney, Australia, July 5-9, 1993, pp. 3-4.
32. Bernadette McMenamin, National Coordinator of ECPAT Australia, testified before the Australian House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs: "Ideally, we would prefer that the offender be punished in the country in which the crime is committed." Transcript of "Inquiry into the Crimes (Child Sex Tourism) Amendment Bill 1994," May 1994, p. 4.
33. O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), p. 89.
34. See Note 7.
35. The treaty defines the rights of children, including their right to be protected from all forms of abuse. As of August 1994, 166 nations had ratified, 9 had signed with the anticipation of ratifying and 15 had done neither. The U.S. was the only Western industrialized country in the last group. (Information provided by UNICEF.)
36. Thomas, D., "Sexual Exploitation of Women & Children." Testimony before the House Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights, March 22, 1994, p.7.
37. Thomas, p. 3.
38. It is worth noting that in 1994, the U.S. Congress passed The Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act to provide funds that will assist Asian countries' law enforcement efforts to protect these animals from poachers. (*Wildlife Conservation*, Feb. 1995, p. 7.) The countries receive no such funds to assist law enforcement efforts to protect prostituted children. By contrast, Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi herself donated to Thailand \$15,000 from her Nobel Peace Prize to assist children in prostitution. (O'Grady, *Rape* [1994], p. 89.)
39. Thomas, p. 8.
40. O'Grady, *Rape* (1994), p. 90.
41. Petras, J. & Wongchaisuwan, T., "Thailand: Free Markets, AIDS, and Child Prostitution." *Z Magazine*, Sept. 1993, p. 38.
42. The absence of any discernible impact may have to do with the small circulation (26,000), and relative obscurity, of the magazine in which it appeared. Then again, there may not be a constituency that approves of these methods.

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For more information, and what you can do about the situation, contact:

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(*This acronym used to stand for End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism. The organization's conception of the problem has expanded. Though it still calls itself ECPAT, the slogan it now uses is: End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes.)

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