

Ministry Seeks to Stop Child Sex Tourism

Through billboards and TV commercials, World Vision hopes to help bring sex tourists to justice

Tourists arriving in Cambodia get the message. Posters at customs kiosks; the city's largest billboard, on the road from the airport to downtown Phnom Penh; notices in high-traffic tourist spots and advertisements in slick travel magazines warn them. If they have come in search of sexual encounters with children, they are not welcome-and Americans, if caught, could land in jail back home.

Launched in 2004, the Stop Child Sex Tourism campaign () not only saturates Cambodia and other nations known as hosts of the underage sex trade with warnings, but also posts messages for would-be offenders at every point along their international itineraries.

On select flights from the U.S. to Asia and Latin America, in-flight videos alert passengers to the penalties for exploiting children. Similar messages can be found in banners on Internet sites such as Yahoo and MSN. CNN estimates that 2.2 million people see the Stop Child Sex Tourism commercials on its network at 39 international airports and in hotels in major cities.

The Christian relief organization World Vision International and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement department are behind this campaign to stop child sex tourism, an aspect of sex trafficking too long overlooked, says World Vision's project director Joe Mettimano.

Funded by \$300,000 in private contributions, a \$500,000 U.S. State Department grant and a \$1 million U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant, the Stop Child Sex Tourism campaign posts its messages at departure, transit and destination points, particularly in Asia and Latin America. It also runs a hotline to which anonymous callers can report violators.

“By partnering with humanitarian groups like World Vision, we enhance our law enforcement abilities overseas,” said Michael J. Garcia, assistant secretary for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “We’re sending a message to these individuals that if you prey on children-whether in the U.S. or abroad-you will be brought to justice.”

The billboard near the Phnom Penh airport features a photo of a child’s eyes and the inscription: “I’m not a tourist attraction. It’s a crime to make me one.” Another ad reads “Abuse a child in this country, go to jail in yours.”

Also in Phnom Penh, World Vision purchased several hundred helmets and distributed them to drivers of mopeds, which in Cambodia serve as taxis. Emblazoned on the back of the helmets is the “I’m not a tourist attraction” message. Similar warnings alert visitors in Thailand, Costa Rica and Mexico. For Mettimano, this is just the start. Brazil may be next, and other nations may follow.

“There’s a special evil in the abuse and exploitation of the most innocent and vulnerable,” President Bush said before a United Nations Assembly in September 2003. “The victims of the sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life-an underground brutality and lonely fear. Governments should inform travelers of the harm this industry does, and

the severe punishment.”

World Vision estimates that the worldwide commercial sex trade entraps about 2 million children, some as young as 5 years old. Most adult “customers” are nationals, but a growing number come from foreign countries. “In this campaign, we decided to target our own guys [Americans],” Mettimano said.

The U.S. PROTECT Act of 2003, which President Bush signed into law, enables the arrest and prosecution of Americans who go abroad and engage in sexual activity with a child under the age of 18. Punishment can be up to 30 years in jail.

Americans make up about a quarter of all sex tourists. In the first 18 months after the PROTECT Act was passed, more than 20 U.S. citizens were arrested, and five were convicted of having sex with minors in a foreign country. The arrests came in Cambodia, Costa Rica, Kenya, Mexico, Russia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Offenders fall into two categories, Mettimano said. The preferential offender is a pedophile who travels overseas with the specific intent to find a child and engage in sexual activities. A situational offender visits a country for legitimate reasons such as business or vacation and decides to experiment. World Vision targets both groups.

For World Vision, countering sex tourism goes beyond preventative warnings. Staff members work with the U.S. State Department and destination nations so that they can enforce the law. “What World Vision brings to the table is our presence,” Mettimano said. “We are in more than 100 nations working directly with these kids who are at risk.”

World Vision seeks local permission to work in a nation and assists governments with training. "The governments [that] do acknowledge the problem usually want to partner with us," Mettimano said. "They know that they have a problem with their own people. The last thing they need is for foreigners to come in and make the problem worse."

In Cambodia, a 12-year-old girl told World Vision workers about her foreign "boyfriend." After some detective work, the perpetrator was identified and his native government notified.

"Our goal is to protect children from exploitation," Mettimano said. "We are going to do everything we can to remove anyone who exploits them. Even if we are able to deter one guy and protect one child, the whole program is worthwhile."

Steven Lawson