

## Child sex tourism raises its head in India

As India tries to get more visitors to its shores, experts are warning that child sex tourism is raising its head in a dangerous way, not just in tourist havens but also in religious hubs in Tamil Nadu and Orissa.

Carmen Madrinan, an international expert in the field, who was here for a UN conference on human trafficking, said the child sex industry in India had spread from its traditional hubs in Goa and Kerala.

'It is also gaining momentum in religious places in Tamil Nadu and Orissa,' Madrinan, executive director of the NGO End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and the Trafficking of Children (ECPAT), told IANS.

'India is among the most rapidly growing economies in the world and the introduction of economy airlines, the development of untapped destinations, improved infrastructure and new modes of tourism - such as eco and experiential tourism - have brought tourists even closer to unexposed communities.

'With this increased proximity, criminal activities against children and other vulnerable groups are likely to grow,' said Madrinan.

According to the Indian ministry of tourism, tourist arrivals in the country rose from 3.92 million in 2005 to 4.43 million in 2006, showing a sharp increase of 13 percent.

'Asian countries, including Thailand, India and the Philippines, have long been prime destinations for child sex tourists,' said Jeff Avina, director of operations at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Vienna.

'India's economy is booming and it is high time the government here enforced laws more stringently before the situation becomes difficult to manage.'

The issue caught media and government attention in India in 1991 when six men were accused of sexually abusing downtrodden children at an orphanage run by co-accused Freddy Albert Peats in Goa. They hailed from countries like Australia, New Zealand and Germany.

According to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the accused not only sexually assaulted the young boys but also took their nude photographs. Unfortunately, only Peats could be sentenced as the other managed to flee the country.

The state, in fact, has a special law against child sexual abuse, the Goa Children Act 2003. The fines and jail terms under it are severe - Rs.100,000 with imprisonment for one to three years for sexual assault and incest, and Rs.200,000 with seven to 10 years' jail in the case of a grave sexual assault.

In other parts of the country, 'the accused is booked under rape charges for molesting a girl child while in the case of a male child, the accused is booked for sodomy,' said a senior police official.

Child sex tourists are typically male and come from all income brackets. While some tourists are

paedophiles who seek out children for sexual relationships, many are situational abusers who do not consistently seek out children as sexual partners.

According to a study conducted by ECPAT, more than one million children worldwide are drawn into the sex trade each year. 'Male boys are more victimised or sought after in the industry,' Madrinan said.

'Global work against child sex tourism has revealed that individuals and groups with a sexual interest in children have learned to use the infrastructure of tourism and the backdrop of socio-economic exclusion that at times surrounds tourist centres to abuse children for sex.'

She said the most significant societal factor that pushes children into prostitution is poverty.

'Children in these families become easy targets for procurement agents in search of young children. They are lured away from broken homes by 'recruiters' who promise them jobs in a city and then force the children into prostitution.

Some poor families themselves send their children for prostitution or sell them into the sex trade to obtain desperately needed money,' Madrinan added.

Renuka Choudhary, minister for women and child development, told IANS: 'Sex tourism exists in almost every country and we are aware of the problem here. Paedophiles would not be spared at any cost.

'I have complained about sex tourism to the home ministry and they have assured me of taking appropriate action on it,' Choudhary added.

*Sahil Makkar* ( © IANS / India eNews)