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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Stop the Traffick - transcript

COMMENTATOR (COMM): Previously on Life...

HALFDAN MAHLER: We are deeply disturbed by what is happening to us in the contemporary world.

ANNA TIBAIJUKA: You find that these are people who have moved from the countryside. They don't have requisite education, they don't have skills, they are not able to find a job...

MICHAEL PARKES: You need shelter - you need a roof. How can you have dignity? How can you bring up a family if you don't have some space in the world to live?

COMM: A police raid in Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia. Officers have been tipped off that this brothel is illegally holding girls as young as 12 years old. They've been sold to the owner to work as prostitutes. Photographs are taken as evidence. In Cambodia you can legally be a prostitute at 18 but the selling of children for sex contravenes all moral and legal codes.

POLICE OFFICER (TRANSLATION): How old are you?

COMM: Having commandeered a tourist bus as cover for their operation the police are taking the girls to the station to establish their age and their identities. Leng is twelve years old. She was rescued in a similar raid just five months ago. Leng's mother sold her as a housemaid but she ended up a victim of prostitution, forced to have sex with several clients a day. Here at this rehabilitation centre, Leng - and other girls like her - are learning to rebuild their lives. She's learning to read and write for the first time in her life. It's only recently with counseling that Leng's been able to talk about what happened to her.

HING SREY: Her mother was tricked by another man and so that she brought her to the brothel and sold her there and later on she recognized - the mother recognized that she is working as a prostitute. [Asks Leng how many customers she had per day.] On average five - five customers. Five, guests.

DIRECTOR: Every day?

HING SREY: Yes.

HING SREY (TRANSLATION): The situation is very serious - the problem of sexual abuse and trafficking in children. People are easily deceived by the businessmen. People -especially young girls - can't read or write. So all these girls are easily tricked by people who come and charm them. They say that they will look for good jobs for them. The girls don't understand the truth of the situation and go along with them.

COMM: Srey is the Director of this centre - one of several in Cambodia. It's temporary home to 20 girls. Every one of them has a story of abuse or is in danger.

HING SREY (TRANSLATION): If a child has been a prostitute or sexually abused - when they arrive here they are very different to those others here who have not been abused. They just sit down and don't want to talk - they don't want to talk to the others - they seem to feel very inferior and alone.

COMM: Safe now, Leng shares a bedroom with other girls at the shelter. She's one of five children - brought up by her mother on her own after her stepfather was jailed for abusing her. She was sold for 100 dollars and forced to work as a prostitute to pay off this debt. In the brothel where she used to work she had her own room for entertaining clients. Today there are an estimated 50,000 prostitutes in Cambodia. Many brothels masquerade as Karaoke bars. In 1991 there were just 6,000 sex workers. That number trebled within a year - following the end of 20 years of war when thousands of UN peacekeepers came to Cambodia. Most clients today are Cambodian - the numbers of sex workers fuelled by a combination of poverty, corruption and now a new wave of tourism. Over a third of the victims of prostitution are children aged 11 to 17. Most of them are trafficked within Cambodia. Others arrive across the border from Vietnam, Laos or China. Half the girls are sold to traffickers - either intentionally or unwittingly - by parents desperate for cash. Children as young as four have been sold into the sex industry in Cambodia.

In the parks of Phnom Penh, Somaly - who runs a child protection charity - hands out condoms and spells out the dangers of the sex industry to potential clients and sex workers. She's worried about the increasing number of people contracting HIV/AIDS - and the growing exploitation of very young girls trafficked into prostitution.

SOMALY (TRANSLATION): They take a young girl's virginity - because they think it will keep them young, as well as bring them good luck. And also because of the AIDS problem - the increasing number of HIV-positive people. Before virgins were fifteen or sixteen years old but there aren't enough any more. So they look for even younger girls - now around 13 or 14 years old. With the AIDS explosion rich men don't sleep with prostitutes, they buy virgins. Because there are not enough virgins to go around, sometimes a girl will have sex with a customer and then they

get sewn up straight afterwards. They then sleep with another customer. He thinks that she is being 'broken in' and because she bleeds and is in lots of pain they think she must be a virgin.

COMM: Somaly's the director of AFESIP - an organization working with particularly vulnerable girls. She often receives death threats from traffickers who still have contracts on some of the girls she's helped to rescue. Part of her work is to help girls acquire new skills to earn money. Without alternatives, the girls here may have no option but to go back into prostitution.

SOMALY (TRANSLATION): They are traumatized - they are really, really traumatized. You need to hear it from the girls themselves, because many people find it hard to believe. It hurts me to talk about it. It hurts my country and when other women see this abroad they may well be shocked. The problem is monstrous.

MEN CHAN, Social Department Manager, AFESIP (TRANSLATION): This girl came to AFESIP a week ago. Before that she was trafficked from neighboring Vietnam. She was in three brothels. The people there beat her with sticks and tortured her with electric shocks. So now she is not so good - she's damaged. She was refusing clients because she didn't know how to satisfy them - how to be a sex worker - what to do. So she was beaten. She said that the woman who took her promised that she would return her home. But she never did. Nowadays the number of prostitutes is going up. The reason is poverty - there is no work and there's not enough education in the countryside. Most of these girls come from the countryside.

COMM: Seven out of every ten Cambodians live in the countryside. They scratch a living farming the land which is often subject to natural disasters, and flooding. But today the greatest threat to their land is debt - more and more people are selling their land to pay off debts incurred when one of their family falls ill. Without land it's even more difficult to make ends meet. Today, Srey is taking Leng to visit her village to see if it's suitable for her to go home to her mother. This is the first time Leng's been home for six months. Most people here don't own any land of their own. Like many other villages, endemic poverty makes it easy for traffickers to prey on their children.

VILLAGE WOMAN (TRANSLATION): Her house is over there - she was living there....

LENG (TRANSLATION): I've come to visit my mother.

HING SREY: Her mother went away because she could not find her living here.

DIRECTOR: So her mother's disappeared.

HING SREY: Yes.

COMM: Too poor to stay - Leng's mother has abandoned her home to look for work elsewhere.

HING SREY (TRANSLATION): Most families here have somewhere between 6 to 8 children. The children can't go to school because they need to help their parents earn money. They collect small crabs and sell the meat off them. With the tiny income they get from this they have to buy rice for the whole family. It's not enough.

COMM: If they're lucky this work earns a family a mere dollar a day.

HING SREY (TRANSLATION): Before Leng came to stay with me at the centre, she used to pick up these left over crabs on the beach for her living. And then one day a man called Pa Ka called. He told her that if you keep doing this job you'll never earn enough money to survive, but you could work for someone who will give you 150,000 riel - about forty dollars. When Leng's mother heard this, she let her daughter go with him. But he took Leng and sold her to be a prostitute.

COMM: Srey told us that she didn't see any future for Leng in the village. With no family home to go to, Leng must now learn to fend for herself.

The Cambodia/Thai border. Here, 20,000 people cross through the gates every day. Many are children trafficked across to wealthy Thailand - to work in the sex industry, or beg on the streets. Nine out of every ten child beggars in Thailand come from Cambodia. They either travel alone, or are brought over by beggar gangs or agents. Over two-thirds of them are boys. The children are smuggled over in trains, on the backs of trucks, or in buses.

LINDA MANNING, Training Adviser, IOM: Traffickers don't target children who are not resourceful, who are not attractive, who aren't smart. There tends to be a number of ways that children are trafficked. Renting children is probably one of the most significant ways here. And that is where a parent or caregiver rents the services of that child to be taken to Thailand to earn money with the idea that that money will be sent back to the family. In reality they very rarely see the money. Many families know who the trafficker is and we do find that some families actually think that their child would be better working and earning some money in Thailand as a beggar, rather than not having any food or livelihood in Cambodia.

COMM: Linda works at this reception centre, near the border with Thailand - temporary home to children who've been trafficked over and then sent back to Cambodia. With many still indebted to the gangs who'd bought or rented them it is too dangerous to show the children's faces.

LINDA MANNING: We've got quite a few older children who may have been trafficked at two or four and have lived in Thailand for ten years. They have no idea where they came from so they have no history. Little children clearly have a very

limited knowledge of where they came from. Also, children who have intellectual difficulties - who have been trafficked for begging - they have very little memory as well as to where they come from. So you start to get this fairly significant group of children who can't identify where they've come from - and of course our tracing has to come from the children, they are our only source.

LORN PROS (TRANSLATION): I asked someone to take me to Thailand, I went there to look for money. I was living with a lady who told me to beg for money and when I got some I gave it to her. She said when I got a lot she'd share it with me. Someone told me she used this money to gamble and she only gave me a little bit. She told me she sent the rest to my mother.

LINDA MANNING: Many of the children, when you talk to them, they feel like it's their duty to earn money. Many of the children with disabilities feel that it's the only way they are going to be valuable to their family. So it's really hard work with those children to actually say there may be things that you want to do.

IAN HOPLEY. International Police Training Adviser, Ministry of Interior, Cambodia: Here, here, here, here! OK, up on the chairs! OK, now, I want the man sitting next to him to crouch down and look up at him. Now, let me ask, the people who are looking up - how do you feel? Do you feel intimidated? You are looking up at this giant of a person. This is how children feel when they look up at you. Bearing in mind their age you explain to them as best you can what will now happen and what steps you are taking to protect them and to make sure that it doesn't happen again. This is one of the first projects that I know of that actually targets the law enforcement - it's no good having laws when they are not enforced. It's - a lot of the projects that they have here in Cambodia are actually looking at victims and assisting the victims after the events occurred, et cetera. But they have never really targeted the actual law enforcement side of things before. The laws in Cambodia are fairly complex at this stage, although there is a new criminal code being drafted at the moment. They rely on some of the old French colonial type laws, the UNTAC laws which are left over from when the UN was here, and also they have a human trafficking legislation which they can utilize as well.

SOMALY: Yes there are laws, many laws - too many laws. The problem is that people don't apply them. People don't earn enough. They have to be corrupt to get a bit of money to buy food or to buy things for their women. You don't get good wages in Cambodia and so you have to be corrupt. The staff working for the Cambodian government don't have good wages either and so we have well known legal and corruption problems.

COMM: It's rare that traffickers get put away. They either don't get caught or they pay off the judges. Luy Sokha has been sent to prison, convicted of selling her daughter to traffickers. She feels that she is being made an example of.

LUY SOKHA (TRANSLATION): I am scared here in prison. I'm upset because I see that if someone with money can avoid prison. Other people have money to bribe, but I don't. For example, when I went to court they asked me for 200 dollars. I didn't have it and so I was sentenced to prison for five years.

IAN HOPLEY: You'll hear cases often where the wrong people have been charged and hopefully - again a little way along - when more police and judiciary get trained in this field they'll start to recognize who are the victims, who are the offenders. What we try and do is place emphasis on the fact that when you're dealing with child exploitation matters corruption is just not an issue, it's - we don't put up with it in any way shape or form. And hopefully that message will get through.

COMM: Poverty, corruption and the lack of other opportunities drive more and more children into the hands of the traffickers. Democracy is still quite new here. But the government, and agencies like the International Labor Organization are addressing the issue. There's now a national plan specifically designed to crack down on the trade in children.

H.E. VONG SOT, Under Secretary of State, Ministry of Social Affairs, Cambodia (TRANSLATION): We have now set up three Committees: the committee against trafficking, the committee against child labor, and the committee to create a legal framework. It's important that the Ministry of Social Affairs co-operates with all the organizations involved in the fight against trafficking. We're trying to implement the Cambodian government's strategy on trafficking through the non-governmental groups. But we still have a lot to do - and we are still trying hard.

MAR SOPHEA, National Program Manager for ILO-IPEC, Cambodia: We are working with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, other government institutions, the local NGOs. We have developed together what we call a National Framework on Child Labor, to fight against child labor. And there are a lot of things we can do about the trafficking issue but prevention and protection is the best approach. Of course poverty plays a very important role in this but beside poverty it can be the legal issue - the understanding in general of parents and the public of the community - so it has to be, you know, a simultaneous approach.

COMM: As Cambodia moves into the 21st century more and more tourists are visiting. They bring much needed revenue to restore the country's economy. Most of them come to admire the ancient temples of Angkor, to appreciate the Khmer culture and to relax on the beaches in the south. Some, however, visit with a more sinister intent. In July last year, the Ministry of Tourism reported that seven out of every ten children living near Angkor Wat had been propositioned by tourists for sex. Unless this new problem of sex tourism is also dealt with there will be even more children like Leng who face abusive futures. For now Leng remains in the care of Srey in the rehabilitation centre.

HING SREY (TRANSLATION): In the past Cambodians had a strong sense of their culture. The kind of sexual abuse we see today was rare. What we need are strong laws so that the real offenders are punished. Only then, I believe, will the abuse of children stop.

COMM: Back at the station in Phnom Penh, the police judge their raid a success - and they're planning more. But for the confused and scared girls they've rescued - some as young as 12 - the future looks far less certain.

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