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A Cambodian Girl's Tragedy: Being Young and Pretty

By Nicholas D. Kristof

PAILIN, Cambodia

Slavery seems like a remote part of history, until you see scholarly estimates that the slave trade in the 21st century — forced work in prostitution and some kinds of manual labor — is probably larger than it was in the 18th or 19th centuries.

Or until you take a rutted dirt path in northwestern Cambodia to a hut between a rice paddy and a river, and meet a teenage girl named Noy Han. The girl, nicknamed Kahan, suffered the calamitous misfortune of being pretty.

Kahan's village is isolated, accessible most of the year only by boat. There is no school, so she never attended a day of class.

One woman in the village, Khort Chan, had left as a girl and then reappeared years later. One day last year, when Kahan was 16 or 17 (ages are fuzzy here), she ate ice cream that Ms. Khort Chan gave her — and passed out.

Ms. Khort Chan took the unconscious girl away in a boat and disappeared. Kahan's parents sounded the alarm, and the police quickly found Kahan being held upriver in the hut of Ms. Khort Chan's grandmother. "Chan was planning to traffic her to Pailin," a brothel center near the Thai border, said Leang Chantha, the police officer who found her.

Typically, a girl like Kahan would be imprisoned in a trafficker's house, tied up and beaten if she resisted, inspected by a doctor to certify her virginity, and sold for hundreds of dollars to a Cambodian or Thai businessman. Virgins are in particular demand by men with AIDS because of a legend that they can be cured by having sex with a virgin.

Afterward, Kahan would have been locked up in a brothel in Pailin, and sold for \$10 a session for the first couple of months. The price eventually would drop to \$1.50, and by then she would be given greater freedom.

By being rescued, Kahan was spared all that — but she had suffered an overdose of the drugs. "Kahan seemed like a dead person," said her mother, Sang Kha. "Her eyes were rolling, she was drooling."

Even weeks later, Kahan's face remained partially paralyzed, she could not speak, and she was weak and sickly. Desperate to get medical treatment, Ms. Sang Kha borrowed \$200 from usurious money lenders charging 20 percent per month, and the girl's uncle mortgaged his home to help pay for treatment.

But the family is now broke and heavily indebted, and Kahan still can only mumble. “I’m still very weak,” was all I could coax out of her.

The police had released Ms. Khort Chan after two days, and I was unable to track her down. But neighbors at two of her former houses said she had fled after apparently trafficking her own sister.

Some of the neighbors added a layer of complexity to her story: They believe that Ms. Khort Chan herself had been sold to a brothel as a young woman. She escaped or worked her way out, and then became a slave trader herself.

And slavery is what this is. The real problem isn’t prostitution or trafficking, it’s the enslavement of people.

The Lancet, the British medical journal, once estimated that 10 million children 17 and under may work in prostitution worldwide. Not all are coerced, but in the nastier brothels of Cambodia, Nepal, India, Malaysia and Thailand, the main difference from 19th-century slavery is that the victims are mostly dead of AIDS by their 20’s.

“It seems almost certain that the modern global slave trade is larger in absolute terms than the Atlantic slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries was,” notes an important article about trafficking in the current issue of Foreign Affairs. It adds, “Just as the British government (after much prodding by its subjects) once used the Royal Navy to stamp out the problem, today’s great powers must bring their economic and military might to bear on this most crucial of undertakings.”

President Bush has done a much better job than his predecessors in pressing this issue; his State Department office on trafficking is one of his few diplomatic successes. And the issue enjoys bipartisan support, with leadership coming from conservative Republicans like Senator Sam Brownback and liberal Democrats like Representative Carolyn Maloney.

So President Bush, how about using your last two years to make this issue an international priority? A nudge in your State of the Union address could jump-start a new Abolitionist movement, so as to free children now dying slowly from rape and AIDS because they did something as simple as accepting ice cream from a neighbor.

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