



THE ROAD TO RIO

The Vietnam War devastated South-East Asia in the 1970s. As a pawn in the wider struggle we call the Cold War and out of the people's desire for independence thousands of innocent people in Vietnam and Cambodia were caught in a terrible circle of violence.

But there is a curious consequence of the Vietnam War that has not been widely recognised. The war in Vietnam set in motion a series of events which rolled around the world and led to World Congress III against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children which will take place in Rio de Janeiro this November.

This is the way it happened. The Vietnam War was a messy guerrilla war in the early 1970s, much of it fought in dense jungle. The United States poured a remarkable one million combat troops into Vietnam. Masses of young men were enlisted to keep the forces strong. Young people 18-20 years of age, scarcely out of college and with little training, were thrown into the carnage of a ruthless war. The psychological damage to these young men was immense. To maintain morale the army developed a comprehensive scheme of Rest and Recreation (R & R) which enabled the soldiers to have frequent long breaks in friendly Asian countries.

Thailand was the closest and most popular destination and in the 1970's a steady stream of planes flew to Bangkok filled with young men whose pockets were stuffed with American dollars. Anxious to block out the hell of the war they were fighting they sought solace in Bangkok night life. At that stage, Thailand was still a relatively poor country economically and the sudden rush of dollars seemed like a gift from the gods. As troops began arriving in Bangkok young women converged into the city in their thousands. Massage parlours (a euphemism for brothels) sprang up throughout the city and in a single evening a young woman prostitute could receive more money than her parents had earned in a whole lifetime. Bangkok would never be the same.

By the end of the war Thailand was regularly described in the tourist industry as "the sex capital of the world". Japanese male tourists flooded into Thailand after the American troops departed and they were followed by tourists from Europe, America, Australia and other parts of Asia, many of them lured by the opportunity to have cheap sexual adventures. Included in the new arrivals were a number of paedophiles

and child sex abusers whose main interest was to find a place where they could have sex with children and not face problems with the police. Many bought seaside houses south of Bangkok and a paedophile sub-culture attracted an increasing number of foreigners.

In the closing years of the last century shocking stories of child sex abuse by foreigners became frequent in Thailand. In 1984 five young children in Southern Thailand were burned alive in a brothel. They had not escaped the flames because they were manacled to their beds. Soon after a shelter for street boys in Bangkok run by two Mormon men was found to be a place where foreign paedophiles could pick up children to abuse. Stories of parents selling children into sex slavery were rife. Such stories prompted non-governmental and church organisations to conduct a thorough research and in Chiang Mai, May 1990 the results of their studies were brought together and presented to government and UN officials. The research exposed the fact that an estimated more than one million children under the age of 16 years were being held in sexual slavery in the towns and cities of Asia. It also showed the increase in paedophile and child sex tourism.

Within six months of the conference, an international organisation was established to combat this terrible but relatively unknown crime. The organisation ECPAT was founded as an ambitious initial attempt to stop the practice of child slavery in Asia. Thanks to their efforts, the reality of child sex tourism in Asia became common knowledge and many people joined various campaigns to end this practice.

The plan for ECPAT was to promote the issue vigorously with the assumption that, within a few years, people throughout the world would be so outraged they would take action and bring change. Three years later the organisation had received plenty of verbal support but little had actually changed. Reports showed that commercial sex abuse had become an increasingly large industry in Asia and probably in the rest of the world as well.

By 1994 ECPAT personnel realised serious action was required and would mean the involvement of governments. A meeting with consular staff and parliamentarians in Bangkok reinforced this idea. ECPAT was encouraged to take initiatives to establish a political forum at which governments could together take action to police this growing international crime.

A United Nations Conference seemed a likely possibility but when approaches were made the UN indicated that this issue was not part of their agenda. ECPAT toyed with the idea of pushing for an international conference at which both government and non-governmental organisations could be present as delegates. This had never been done before and clearly it posed a new set of problems. Consular advisors suggested the possibility of getting a sympathetic government to host and sponsor an international forum at which governments would be challenged to take action and three possible countries were identified.

With the country's long commitment to working for children, Sweden was first choice. An ECPAT delegation of two people approached the Prime Minister of Sweden with the proposal. From his office they visited all the other relevant government ministries to look at details and by the end of the day the Prime Minister

made a public announcement that Sweden would be honoured to be the host for what came to be called the First World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children held in Stockholm 1996.

There was an immediate response. Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden expressed her unreserved support for the aims of the Congress and agreed to be Patron. After the first six months of planning the Swedish Secretary-General of the Congress indicated that there had been an excellent response and Sweden was hoping that at least 40 other governments would be sending delegates. In the end 130 countries were represented with 122 governments sending an official delegation.

The Congress in Sweden unanimously adopted a resolution urging all governments to develop a Plan of Action to combat child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes. In the next four years almost 100 governments accepted the challenge and prepared their own national Plan of Action. These were presented at the Second World Congress held in Yokohama, Japan in December 2001.

Yokohama extended the vision with 134 countries sending an official delegation. Delegates were more prepared and better informed than they had been at Sweden and there was a stronger attempt to deal with the core issues of stopping the demand for child sex. The growing influence of the internet had become a central issue. In a globalised world inter-governmental cooperation had become essential and the Yokohama Assembly was a good forum for working out the implications of this.

Delegates at the Congress in Sweden and also in Japan said all the right things but could not put in place the mechanism needed for monitoring progress on these issues nor did they provide the resources needed to reach the high ideals of the proposals.

Despite these problems we approach the next Congress in Rio with great hope. There appears to be a growing determination to work internationally to reduce the number of children at risk and to monitor those who would abuse them. We have the vision and perhaps Rio will provide the willpower.

And so the story continues. It has been a long journey from the Vietnam War to Thailand to ECPAT to Sweden to Yokohama and now on to Rio. This will not be the end of the journey but we all hope it will an important and effective milestone.

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