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ECPAT continues fight against abuse

By Shih Hsiu-chuan / Staff reporter

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The exploitation of children for prostitution remains a pressing issue for all countries and requires more than legal instruments to deal with, representatives of the ECPAT International (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) said in Taipei yesterday.

ECPAT International chairperson Maureen Crombie and research and programs adviser Mark Capaldi sat down with reporters after attending a ceremony where the organization received the 2012 Asian Democracy and Human Rights Award from the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy.

“In the world we live in, a child can basically be abused anywhere, anytime and by any perpetrator in any country around the world,” Crombie said, when she was asked about challenges the organizations faced in ending sexual exploitation of children.

Sexual abuse and exploitation of children has occurred throughout history, but it was not until 1996, when the ECPAT organized the first world congress to address the problem in Stockholm, Sweden, that the world acknowledged that “this is a global problem affecting every single country in the world,” Capaldi said.

Since 1996, many countries have focused on the implementation of the Agenda for Action which was adopted at the congress to protect children from sexual exploitation.

However, the problem has not been solved.

“It continues to grow, get more complicated and more difficult,” Crombie said.

With advances in information technology and the involvement of more actors in such child abuse crimes, the problem has evolved and manifested itself in various forms, Crombie said.

“Offenders could also take videos of the abuse in the hotel rooms ... and they could sell the images,” she said.

“We need to work in a more coordinated fashion” to respond to new challenges as technological advances have made more resources available to people who seek to exploit children, such as exploitation using the Internet and mobile technologies, Crombie said.

Capaldi said that one of the main difficulties in dealing with the issue is getting an understanding of the number of the children involved.

“It is always a challenge when you meet with governments. Everybody wants to know how big the problems are, but it is very difficult to come up with figures because of its underground nature,” he said.

The latest Global Monitoring Report on the Status of Action against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Taiwan published by ECPAT last year also mentioned the problem.

“Although it is known that child prostitution exists in Taiwan, reliable statistics on the extent of the problem are unavailable,” according to the report.

To tackle this problem, a number of things need to be done, Capaldi said.

ECPAT International encourages all relevant government agencies to contact children who have experienced sexual exploitation to know what types of abuse they have experienced and to make statistics available to government agencies and civil society, he said.

Sharing statistics would allow civic organizations, like ECPAT Taiwan, a founding member of ECPAT International, to work with governments in doing research to identify new manifestations of the problem, Capaldi said.

“Commercial exploitation of children is always evolving. You solve the problem in one area, it moves to another area. Prevention is better than cure. We need to identify and learn about the problem, before it becomes even more serious,” he said.

Public education is also important, Capaldi said.

Although criminality is underground, there will always be people in the community who see things, he said.

“They may not exactly know what’s going on, but they can help. We need to empower the public to recognize when a child is in a vulnerable situation and in need of help and to provide them with an opportunity to report their concerns in a safe way,” Capaldi said.

Both Crombie and Capaldi praised the efforts Taiwan has devoted to addressing the problem of child abuse.

Because Taiwan is not a member of the UN, it is not party to the Convention of the Rights to the Child, its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, child prostitution and child pornography, or any other international or regional convention on the problems.

“The diplomatic challenge has motivated Taiwan to do even more to show the world that this is an important issue concerning it internationally, not just in Taiwan,” Capaldi said.

Crombie said that Taiwan is a world leader in pursuing human rights.

To address problems like sexual abuse of children we need only use our hearts, she said.

“We don’t necessary need UN guidelines to do the right thing,” she said.

In response to a question on the policy adopted by the Taiwanese government last year that would allow red-light zones to be established at the discretion of local governments, Capaldi said that Taiwan “will have to increase its efforts to protect children even more.”

“Whenever you have a commercial sex sector, you will always find a vulnerable group of children who have been sexually exploited. What happens when you legalize prostitution ... it’s quite simply that demand increases and therefore supply increases,” he said.

Crombie, who comes from New Zealand, said that experiences in her country showed that after prostitution is legalized, underground streets workers are usually worse off, children are put in the most vulnerable position and measures to prevent human trafficking fail.

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