

Christian human rights group tackles “sex tourism”

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Joanne Verbeek, a detective with the Toronto Police sex crimes unit, can now put a human face to the potential victims of “sex tourism”—the children of an impoverished nation who are being preyed on and brutalized by foreigners from countries like Canada.

Verbeek was recently in Cambodia as a volunteer with International Justice Mission (IJM) Canada, a Christian human rights organization that rescues victims of violence, sexual exploitation, slavery and oppression.

For two weeks, the 18-year police veteran helped to train 24 Cambodian national police officers in the basics of crime-scene protection and witness protection.

And from her classroom in Phnom Penh, Verbeek did not need to walk far to see firsthand why the city is so attractive to sex tourists.

“There’s so many street kids. And as a police officer my back gets up because I’m worried for them,” says Verbeek, who attends Bible Faith Church in Toronto.

“Who’s lurking around that may want to take advantage of a little kid that’s in the park who’s playing with the sprinkler and has no clothes on and who’s five or six years old? To a pedophile, I mean, that’s erotic.”

Jamie McIntosh, IJM Canada’s executive director, says Verbeek’s trip to Cambodia is typical of how they operate—which is to come alongside poorer countries that need help enforcing their own domestic laws.

“These countries will say, ‘You’ve got affluent tourists from North America coming over to exploit our kids. We could use your assistance also in addressing the situation, rather than you just denouncing what’s happening overseas,’” he says.

“And one of the ways you work with them,” Verbeek adds, “is you train them.”

“That has been an open door that the Cambodian police has offered and IJM has stepped right through. I believe they can definitely have a very positive influence there, because of the willingness to have the training.”

But IJM Canada is also working here at home to bring sex tourists to justice.

While Verbeek was in Phnom Penh, Donald Bakker was in a Vancouver courtroom pleading guilty to 10 counts of sexual assault—seven of them involving sadistic sex crimes against girls between seven and 12 years old in Svay Pak, Cambodia.

Bakker was sentenced to 10 years in prison, becoming the first person to be prosecuted under a law enacted in 2002 that empowered authorities to go after Canadian sex tourists without the prior consent of the country where the alleged crimes took place.

Police had seized videotapes showing Bakker committing his sex acts, but they could not identify his victims. Yet by a fortuitous chain of events, IJM Canada was able to provide them with footage they shot while rescuing girls from Cambodian brothels.

“Within 72 hours, we were able to give exact locations of where the crimes had taken place and matched six girls [in Bakker’s videotapes] with those that we had identified through some of our undercover operations,” says McIntosh.

McIntosh suspects it was this overwhelming evidence collected overseas that forced Bakker to plead guilty.

Simon Buck, a Vancouver lawyer and spokesman for the children’s rights group *Beyond Borders*, believes Bakker’s conviction will deter other would-be sex tourists.

“They must know that the investigation is not simply going to be catching them with the evidence on their computer,” he says. “There’s going to be an investigation in the [foreign] country, and that evidence will be used here in Canada to prosecute them.”

Another target of IJM Canada’s rescue efforts are the estimated 27 million people, according to *National Geographic*, who are trapped in slavery.

McIntosh says he has personally taken Canadian lawyers with him on rescue missions that have resulted in the release of “dozens and dozens” of slaves.

“We are doing it out of a motivation that says these people are created in the image of God,” he says. “It’s something that we just do to try and express God’s love for these victims.”



Rescue missions have resulted in freedom for many women and children forced to work as sex slaves, says Jamie McIntosh, executive director for International Justice Mission Canada.



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