

HUMAN TRAFFICKING:

AIRLINES TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

*Whilst many readers have visited Thailand and experienced the seemingly opulent nature of Bangkok's high rise buildings, temples and hotels, it is also impossible to walk the streets without noticing the beggars with all their deformities, the homeless children and prostitutes. In the western world, prostitution is often a choice or the result of an individual 'going off the rails' (whether perceived as such or not); in Thailand, on the other hand, prostitutes are victims of poverty and abuse. In July, **Zoë Baum** visited Thailand as part of a human trafficking awareness and prevention initiative. She now explains just why airlines must play their part in tackling modern day slavery.*



Whilst Thailand is often referred to as 'The Land of Smiles' so many of these smiles are masks which thinly veil a multitude of stories of human suffering.

When I visited Thailand earlier this year as part of a human trafficking prevention delegation, organised by the charity JUSTIFI, I met an inspirational woman called Bonita; she had founded Home of New Beginnings. This non-profit organisation is primarily focused on rescuing young girls from the Go-Go bars in Bangkok and taking them to a safe house where they learn how to rebuild their lives and discover new ways to finance themselves. Bonita visits the bars herself, entering as if she was a customer and identifying those who she believes might be persuaded to escape the seedy

world in which they have found themselves. Those girls who have the best chance of being saved are younger victims who are not yet reliant on drugs and alcohol to numb the pain of abuse and depression and therefore have to finance the purchase of such substances. Victims who are being exported overseas are less likely to be dependent on substance abuse as they are generally naive and believe that they are travelling for legitimate employment.

It is important to note that these young girls are not persuaded overnight. Bonita, with time on her hands and a charitable mission in life, builds a relationship with the prostitutes in order to gain their trust and slowly convince them of alternatives. It is unfortunate that in the aviation industry there is little

time for flight attendants or check-in agents who suspect a passenger of being a victim to establish any relationship with the individual and to alert them as to the risks to which they may be exposed. Such aviation staff would have to go above and beyond the call of their normal professional duties if they are to play an active role in preventing human trafficking.

Besides Bonita's hands on approach with the victims at the Go-Go bars, she also spends her time educating people like myself, raising awareness to those unfamiliar with the Thai human trafficking industry. Bonita gave the delegation a breakdown of what she explained to be the causes of human trafficking in Thailand. Both poverty and

lack of education were the more obvious causes, however her insight into Buddhist culture and how it affects the situation was enlightening. Women are expected to be the primary bread winners for their families and many young girls are sent to work in factories rather than completing their education in order to supplement their family's income; a responsibility not placed on their male siblings who are free to continue their education and/or study to become monks. Men, in Thai culture, are indeed regarded as the spiritual providers whilst women must clothe their families and put food on the table. In the same way that young men from the north of England might head south towards London in search of a greater income through legitimate employment, young women in Thailand travel to Bangkok and the tourist resorts for financial gain. Whilst their intent too may be to find a legitimate job it is all too easy for them to end up on a slippery slope and end up as victims of the criminal underworld.

The vast majority of victims on the streets, in the massage parlours and in the Go-Go bars of Bangkok have been trafficked to the Thai capital by road and rail from the northern rural areas of Thailand. Some have even been brought to Thailand from neighbouring countries. However, there are also victims who are trafficked out of Thailand, across borders to other countries in Asia as well as those who are trafficked overseas to Europe and the United States for western consumerism.

Human trafficking is the fastest growing international crime; it is the second largest source of illegal income worldwide which is only exceeded by drug trafficking, although both support one another. The United Nations estimates that 2.5 million people are in forced labour (including sexual exploitation) at any given time, of which half come from the Asia Pacific

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region. The estimated annual profit for human trafficking worldwide is over US \$30 billion. From these figures it is clear to see that this is a global issue which requires international coverage.

Erin Zaikis, who works at JUSTIFI, shares her belief that, "I think that all airline employees, but especially flight attendants and pilots, should be educated on suspicious signs and behaviours that would indicate that a passenger is either a trafficker or being trafficked. They should have someone to report the problem to immediately and be able to work with security (law enforcement, and in the US, the Department of Homeland Security, US Customs & Border Patrol) to detain and question the suspected passengers."

As well as her active role in JUSTIFI, Zaikis worked at ECPAT International in Bangkok in 2011. ECPAT (which originally stood for End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism, but now has a wider remit) first introduced the Tourism Child Protection Code of Conduct almost 10 years ago, which listed suggested guidelines for the travel and tourism industry to fight child trafficking. Zaikis shared one example of where the tourism industry has begun to take social responsibility, "In the past decade, many international hotel chains have signed on - Wyndam, Hilton, and Accor to name a few - and recently airlines are starting to do so as well, including major ones like Delta." However, there is much still to be done and, as Zaikis emphasised, "The real success will come when every single airline and every airline employee is educated about human



Tom Karen of the Tom Karen Centre in Chang Rai (Credit: JUSTIFI)

trafficking and takes responsibility for the things they see." Airline involvement in the fight is vital as this may be the last opportunity a victim has to be in a public area before being transported from the arrival airport to captivity. Due to the lack of time at check-in, security and border control, I believe that it is only by the training of aircrew and the running of videos through the in-flight entertainment system that we stand a chance of making a difference.

After visiting Home of New Beginnings in Bangkok, the delegation headed to the north of Thailand to visit a number of charities which primarily focus on child protection. The Hug Project aims to create prevention, intervention and aftercare programmes for children who are victims of abuse, violence and exploitation. This charity was established for children who are at risk of becoming human trafficking victims. The project works alongside the Thai government and NGOs aiming to combat human trafficking issues in Thailand. Likewise,



Bonita addressing the JUSTIFI human trafficking awareness delegation in Bangkok in July 2013 (Credit: JUSTIFI)



“...the Blue Lightning Initiative provides US commercial airlines and their employees with a voluntary mechanism to identify suspected human trafficking victims and to notify federal authorities...”

The Sold Project provides scholarships to children who can no longer afford to remain in education; their ultimate aim is to stop child prostitution, through education. And finally at the Tom Karen Centre in Chang Rai, I was fortunate enough to meet the centre’s inspirational founder. Tom was a member of the Karen hill tribe and he believes that educating young people and warning them of the dangerous world in which they live is the best form of prevention. Tom said that, “By teaching children English, one is enabling them to double their potential income” and this might encourage many to remain within the legitimate Thai workforce rather than having to opt for alternative sources of income. For all four of the charities I have mentioned, their focus is ultimately prevention. Despite this, as aforementioned, the numbers who are still lured into slave labour and

prostitution demands that other action must be taken to help stem the tide. Industry, especially those sectors involved in transportation, can play their role.

It is important to note that it is easier to intervene in a country like Thailand, where poverty is the driving force and where families often sell their own children into slavery for financial gain. Here, providing alternative sources of income is the natural solution. In other parts of the world, mafia-style gangs dominate the industry by stealing children and vulnerable adults from their families either by forced abduction or by promising the victim a more glamorous lifestyle away from home, perhaps overseas.

Identification of potential victims is one thing, managing the way in which we deal with them is another. Airlines might be concerned about the fines which they might incur through the carriage of inadmissible passengers, yet as the June 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report (issued by the US State Department) highlights, “When authorities misidentify trafficking victims as illegal migrants or criminals deserving punishment, those victims can be unfairly subjected to additional harm, trauma, and even punishment

such as arrest, detention, deportation, or prosecution.” Accordingly, we must ensure that the industry treats potential victims of human trafficking with care and is sympathetic to their plight.

Indeed, the US is being very proactive in this regard. This June, a new partnership between the US government and four US commercial airlines - Delta Air Lines, JetBlue, Allegiant Air and North American Airlines - was launched, whereby the carriers will train their employees to recognise indicators of human trafficking both inflight and on the ground.

“...AAI has called upon the 57 nations of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to follow Ukraine’s example in setting national protocols to report ‘tips’ to law enforcement...”

Together, the US Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have developed a training programme called the Blue Lightning Initiative that is available to airlines as part of the DHS

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Blue Campaign, to help them educate their employees on potential indicators of human trafficking and how to identify potential victims. The Blue Lightning Initiative provides US commercial airlines and their employees with a voluntary mechanism to identify suspected human trafficking victims and to notify federal authorities. The partnership is part of the DOT's efforts to raise awareness about human trafficking and ensure that the U.S. transportation system is not being exploited for trafficking purposes.

In 2012, the DOT mandated that all its own 55,000 employees take human trafficking awareness training. And in October last year, it announced a partnership with Amtrak (the US rail system) whereby its 20,000 employees would be provided with training and given awareness materials.

Back in 2010, American Airlines issued a bulletin to its flight attendants specifically citing what signs to look for and the procedures they were expected to follow. This was as a result of Airline Ambassadors International's (AAI) and Innocents at Risk's Flight Attendant Initiative which was started with the assistance of senior flight attendant Sandra Fiorini in 2008. AAI is a US charity which has been extremely

What You Can Do

Be observant of passengers as they Check in, board, and fly, especially Children, those who accompany them and young women traveling alone.

If several of these traits are present, do not confront suspected traffickers or try to rescue suspected victims, however if you are:

IN AIR: Have pilot contact FBI or ground authorities.

ON GROUND Call toll free: 1.866.347.2423 (HSI/ICE Tip line - US, Canada, and Mexico; International, Call toll free: 802-872-6199 or go to: <http://www.ice.gov/tips>)



Airline Ambassadors
INTERNATIONAL
www.airlineamb.org

Airline Ambassadors International has produced wallet-sized cards listing trafficking indicators and useful telephone numbers

proactive in delivering training sessions at airports, distributing luggage tags and issuing wallet-sized cards listing trafficking indicators and telephone numbers that flight attendants, and other

Every year,
as many as
300,000 U.S.
children may
be forced into
sexual slavery.

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put an end to it.

Human Trafficking...

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Report it!

personnel, can report their concerns to. AAI has also run a Train-the-Trainer course in Ukraine where it has played an instrumental role in the establishment of a reporting hotline. Nancy Rivard, President

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“...some airlines are already recognising that they have a social responsibility to act, but the vast majority of carriers have yet to engage with the issue...”

of AAI has since called upon the 57 nations of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to follow Ukraine's example in setting national protocols to report 'tips' to law enforcement. AAI will also be presenting to Interpol in France and to a Congressional Hearing in the US later this year.

In the UK, Virgin Atlantic has harnessed positive publicity with its anti-trafficking initiative. In 2011, the airline started working alongside the UK Home Office in developing appropriate training for its cabin crew. The Virgin pilot project included an e-learning package designed to raise awareness among staff about the issues surrounding human trafficking and detailed the indicators to look out for during a flight. Cabin crew were also

granted access to a 24-hour helpline to report their concerns to Border Force in order that officers could meet the flight and question the individual concerned, allowing law enforcement agencies to take action against traffickers and provide support to the victims of trafficking.

But the news is not all positive. Firstly the aforementioned initiatives are a rarity. Secondly there are those industry insiders who, far from preventing trafficking, are actually knowingly effecting it. This September, for example, an airport security officer in Trinidad and Tobago was arrested at Piarco International Airport for allegedly facilitating the importation of Venezuelan women for placement in local brothels.

As US Secretary of State John F. Kerry stated in his introduction to the June 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report, "We also have a moral obligation to meet this challenge head on. Human trafficking is an assault on our most dearly held values of freedom and basic human dignity". Some airlines, as highlighted, are already recognising that they have a social responsibility to act, but the vast majority of carriers have yet to

engage with the issue. Each one of them needs to find its own Tom or its own Bonita – its own employee who is going to insist on counter-trafficking initiatives. Could that be you? Or, is it not your problem? ■



Zoë Baum is a final year student at the University of Birmingham, UK.

Links to charities:

Justifi:

www.justifi.org

Home of New Beginnings:

www.homeofnewbeginnings.com

The Hug Project:

www.thaiconnections.org/project-hug

The Sold Project:

www.thesoldproject.com

Tom Karen Centre:

www.tomkarenscenter.com

