

A Rare, Direct Warning from Japan Signals a Shift in the Fight against Child Sex Tourism in Asia

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Japan's embassy in Laos and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs has [issued](#) a rare and unusually direct advisory, warning Japanese men against "buying sex from children" in Laos.

The move was [sparked](#) by Ayako Iwatake, a restaurant owner in Vientiane, who allegedly saw social media posts of Japanese men bragging about child prostitution. In response, she launched a petition calling for government action.

The Japanese-language bulletin makes clear such conduct is [prosecutable](#) under both Laotian law and Japan's child prostitution and pornography law, which applies extraterritorially.

This diplomatic statement was not only a legal warning. It was a rare public acknowledgement of Japanese men's alleged entanglement in transnational child sex tourism, particularly in Southeast Asia.

It's also a moment that demands we look beyond individual criminal acts or any one nation and consider the historical, racial and structural inequalities that make such mobility and exploitation possible.



Japanese Embassy in Laos warns against child prostitution following social media posts



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A Changing Map of Exploitation

Selling and buying sex in Asia is nothing new. The contours have shifted over time but the underlying sentiment has remained constant: some [lives](#) are cheap and commodified, and some [wallets](#) are deep and entitled.

Japan's involvement in overseas prostitution stretches back to the Meiji period (1868-1912). Young women from impoverished rural regions (known as *karayuki-san*) migrated abroad, often to Southeast Asia, to work in the sex industry, from port towns in Malaya to brothels in China and the Pacific Islands.

If poverty once pushed Japanese women abroad to sell their bodies, by the second half of the 20th century – [fuelled](#) by Japan’s postwar economic boom – it was wealthy Japanese men who began [travelling overseas to buy sex](#).

Around the 2000s, the dynamic flipped again. In South Korea, now a developed economy, men [travelled](#) to Southeast Asia – and later to [countries](#) such as Russia and Uzbekistan – following routes once taken by Japanese men.

Later in the same period, the flow took an even darker turn.

Japanese and South Korean men began to [emerge](#) as major buyers of child sex abroad, particularly across Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and even Mongolia.

According to the United States Department of State, Japanese men [continued](#) to be “a significant source of demand for sex tourism”, while South Korean men [remained](#) “a source of demand for child sex tourism”.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime and other organisations have also [flagged](#) both countries as key contributors to child sexual exploitation in the region.

From Exporter to Destination: Japan’s New Role in the Sex Trade

A more recent and troubling shift appears to be [unfolding](#) within Japan.

Amid ongoing economic stagnation and the depreciation of the yen, Tokyo has reportedly [become](#) a destination for inbound sex tourism. Youth protection organisations have observed a notable rise in foreign male clients, particularly Chinese, frequenting areas where teenage girls and young women engage in survival sex.

What ties these movements together is not just culturally specific [beliefs](#), such as the fetishisation of virginity or the superstition that sex with young girls brings good luck in business, but power.

The Battle to Protect Children

The global campaign to end child sex tourism began in earnest with the [founding](#) of ECPAT (a global network of organisations that seeks to end the sexual exploitation of children) in 1990 to confront the rising exploitation of children in Southeast Asia.

See [this](#).

Despite [legal frameworks and international scrutiny](#), the abuse of children remains disturbingly common.

Several factors converge here: endemic poverty, weak law enforcement and a constant influx of wealthier foreign men. Add to that the digital age of information and communication technologies, where child sex can be advertised, arranged and commodified through encrypted platforms and invitation-only forums, and the crisis deepens.

While local governments often pledge reform, implementation is inconsistent.

Buyers, especially foreign buyers, often manage to [evade](#) consequences. However, in early

2025, Japan's National Police Agency [arrested](#) 111 people – including high school teachers and tutors – in a nationwide crackdown on online child sexual exploitation, conducted in coordination with international partners.

Why This Moment Matters

The shock surrounding the Laos revelations and the unusually direct response from Japanese authorities offers a rare opportunity to confront the deeper systems at work.

Sex tourism doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's enabled by uneven development, transnational mobility, weak regulation and social silence. But this moment also shows grassroots activism can force institutional action.

Japan's official warning wasn't triggered by a government audit or diplomatic scandal. It came because Ayako Iwatake saw social media posts of Japanese men boasting about buying sex from children and refused to look away.

When she delivered the petition to the embassy, it responded quickly. Less than ten days later, the Foreign Ministry issued a public warning, clearly outlining the legal consequences of child sex crimes committed abroad.

Iwatake's action is a reminder: it doesn't take a government to expose a system. It takes someone willing to speak out – even when it's uncomfortable. As she [told](#) Japanese newspaper Mainichi Shimbun:

It was just too blatant. I couldn't look the other way.

It's commendable that Japan acted swiftly. But a warning alone isn't enough. Japan should strengthen and expand its international cooperation to combat these heinous crimes.

A more decisive model can be seen in a recent case in Vietnam, where US authorities [infiltrated](#) a livestream child sex abuse network for the first time in that country. Working undercover for months, they coordinated with Vietnamese officials to arrest a mother who had been sexually abusing her daughter on demand for paying viewers abroad.

The rescue of the nine-year-old victim showed what serious cross-border intervention looks like.

But for every headline-grabbing scandal, there are hundreds of untold stories.

The Laos case should be the beginning of a broader reckoning with how sex, money and power move across borders – and who pays the price.

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