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On the mean streets of Poipet

Written by May Titthara and Eleanor Ainge Roy

MONDAY, 22 JUNE 2009

POIPET

Rising numbers of street children are turning up in the once-lawless border town, lured there by lax law enforcement, gang protection and easy pickings.

THE sun had not yet risen over the border town of Poipet in northwestern Cambodia, when Sous Veasna, 10, began his daily march to Thailand. With him were a dozen other children, still rubbing the sleep from their eyes as they passed the gaudy Las Vegas Casino and the faded Tropicana.

This gang, made up mostly of children less than 15 years old, is one of many operating between the porous border of Poipet and Aranyaprathet, Thailand.

"The town is getting a reputation as a good place for orphans and street children to live," said one border officer who has been living in Poipet for 15 years and identified himself only as Mr Cham.

"There are so many now that they take safety in numbers, and local residents are afraid of them because they steal and take drugs," he said, adding that most border officers turn a blind eye to the children crossing every day through the "black routes" because they know they have no other means of earning a living.

In total, there are around 850 Cambodian



Photo by: ELEANOR AINGE ROY

One of an estimated 850 children working in Poipet collects cans to recycle earlier this month. NGO workers are struggling to help the



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street children operating in and around Poipet, said Yan Sam, project co-coordinator of the drop-in centre Damnok Toek.

burgeoning population of street children in the border town.

An estimated 200 to 300 Cambodian street children cross the border to work illegally in Thailand every day, mostly informal work at the Loung Kloeu market, Yan Sam said.

Authorities and NGOs say it is impossible to verify figures. While some of the children spend the occasional night in an NGO drop-in centre, the majority do not, as night is their most profitable time.

"In the night if I have money, I go to buy drugs because they are cheap and they stop me feeling hungry," said one gang member, identified only as Mao, 15.

The Poipet children themselves say the rising number of street kids in the flush casino towns of Aranyaprathet and Poipet is due largely to the fact that street children can fare better there than in other parts of Cambodia. On a good night they might pull in 100 baht to 200 baht (US\$2.91 to \$5.82) from a generous punter with a lucky hand.

More typically, street children earn between 20 baht and 40 baht per day, 50 percent of which they must give to their gang leader.

"If I don't earn enough money, the older gangsters will beat me," says Sao Sreyny, 7. Despite the threat of physical abuse, she says she stays with the gang for want of any route out of the marginalised existence she has fallen into.

"I know the things I do are bad for society, but society does not care about me, and the big gangster will give me drugs, so I regard him as my father."

Gangland rules

According to Kheav Bory from the rights group Adhoc, most of Poipet's street children are organised into gangs, which are usually about 50 to 60 members strong. The older gangsters, generally aged between 20 and 25 years, make their living "leading" the group, and the younger members pay the older members to take care of them.

I know the things I do are bad for society, but society does not care about me.

In return they are offered protection from rival gangs, food and often drugs - usually glue or metamphetamine - to feed their addictions, which Adhoc claims many gang members actually encourage as a means to control the children.

Drug use is endemic, while physical and sexual abuse is common and likely to go unpunished, Kheav Bory said.

"The local authorities largely ignore the gangs of street children, as they have no way to make money off of them," Kheav Bory said.

"They will only act when the gangs turn violent towards each other, or robberies become too frequent."

Young gang members say they avoid authorities by targeting houses and property outside of the busy Poipet town, meaning they are less likely to get caught.

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Because the majority of the child gang members are very young, they benefit from a certain legal immunity - no one under the age of 15 is meant to be sent to prison in Cambodia.

If caught, the children are instead sent to the Poipet Transit Centre, a re-education centre run by the Ministry of Social Affairs. But according to the centre's director, Chheang Maneth, her facility caters mostly to trafficked women and children and has no authority to detain children against their will.

Chheang Maneth also said her centre lacks the resources to deal with violent, drug-addicted children with a history of criminal activity. As a result, the task of looking after the street children's welfare often falls to NGOs such as Damnok Toek and Krousar Thmey, which have been set up specifically to work with them.

Both organisations send their staff members out at night several times a week to try to persuade the children to stay in their facilities.

But by their own admission, they are only reaching a fraction of Poipet's street-kid population. In June, Krousar Thmey received only 23 children at their drop-in centre. The concern is that Poipet is gaining a reputation as a street child's paradise, with lax authorities, easy access to drugs and numerous options for begging and stealing.

"The government needs to put pressure on the authorities to force these street children into our drop-in centres," says Sin Bunyang, a peer educator at Krousar Thmey.

"They are getting more powerful and no one can be bothered to deal with them," he said.

Though NGOs like Krousar Thmey blame the authorities for not doing enough, immigration officer Sao Bunrith says the Poipet authorities are working hard to tackle the problem of rogue children.

"We don't know how many children cross the border daily, but if we catch them we send them to the Poipet Transit Centre for re-education," he said.

But for many of the street kids, like Mao, 15, the lack of support from the government or NGOs condemns him to continuing with his life on the streets.

"I don't want to do this, but I have no choice. I feel like I am in hell now, I am not a person and also not a ghost," he told the Post.

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