

From Tragedy to Slavery

By [Juliette Terzieff](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [January 24, 2005](#).

The children orphaned by the Asian tsunami are becoming easy targets for human trafficking rings.

Having survived the terrible wrath of nature, the youngest survivors of the Asian tsunami are faced with a new peril: child trafficking. In recent weeks, there have been numerous reports of international trafficking and illegal adoption rings looking to exploit the thousands of traumatized children separated from family members.

While accurate numbers remain hard to come by, the United Nations estimates 1.5 million children were affected when killer waves swamped 13 Asian nations wiping out 220,000 people on Dec. 26. According to official estimates, as many as 50,000 children have lost one or both parents.

A Child Trafficker's Paradise

The first official case of trafficking last week involved a 4-year old boy from Banda Aceh in Indonesia. Aid workers became suspicious of the couple accompanying the child when he arrived at a hospital in Medan – a well-known departure point for smugglers taking children out of Indonesia. The couple first told medical professionals they were the boy's parents, but subsequently claimed to be his neighbors. In this case, authorities soon stepped in to take custody of the boy. Since then Indonesian aid agencies have reported 10 attempted cases of child-trafficking.

There are alarming signs that other children may not be as lucky. A UNICEF worker in Malaysia, for example, received an e-mail offering 300 orphans up for adoption. It assured the recipient that all paperwork would be "taken care of." Indonesian authorities also confirmed reports that dozens of young children were ferried out of Sumatra by unknown adults in early January – before the government slapped a ban on the removal of children under the age of 16 from the country.

The child-trafficking threat is not limited to Indonesia, nor is it just professional smugglers who are kidnapping and selling these children. "We are getting reports of people trying to sell children or claim children that are not their own," said Geoffrey Keele, communications officer for UNICEF in Sri Lanka. "At this point, it appears to be more opportunistic than a widespread organized criminal activity campaign but, absolutely, it is something we are watching very, very closely."

In Sri Lanka, a 63-year-old man, A.H. Somadasa, was arrested for trying to sell his own grandchildren after their mother died in last month's tsunami. The girls, aged 7 and 9, were reunited with their father last week after authorities intervened.

Sri Lankan children also face the prospect of becoming the newest recruits of the bloody civil war. The New York-based international watchdog, Human Rights Watch, has already chronicled a half-dozen attempts by Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers to recruit pre-pubescent boys as soldiers in their guerilla army.

A Race Against Time

Despite widespread agreement on where the aid effort for orphans is headed, getting there isn't going to be easy. "Registration and a safe environment, in place as quickly as possible, are key to helping this most vulnerable group," says Birgithe Lund-Henriksen, chief of UNICEF's Indonesia child protection unit.

Registrations in relief camps across the region are well underway, but it will be weeks – maybe months – before aid workers and officials can reach far-flung towns and villages. "Without a doubt the biggest danger is for children who do not have a protective family environment to shield them," says Keele. "All of the children exposed to the devastation are traumatized, but none are more vulnerable than the orphans."

In a region where birth registrations are sporadic at best – especially in impoverished rural areas – identifying orphaned children and tracking down blood relatives is going to be a herculean task – and a process that is unlikely to hit its stride anytime soon. Aid workers predict it will be at least a year before registrations and meeting the basic needs of survivors are taken care of; and then years before the tsunami victims can approach regaining what was lost.

Adding to the challenge is the reality that human trafficking has long been a thriving business in the regions hit by the disaster. "We're extremely concerned about trafficking, as it was a significant problem that existed prior to the tsunami. With syndicates already in place, it's obvious they'll attempt to take advantage of the chaos existing now," says Lund-Henriksen.

Every year one to two million women and children are trafficked across the globe, with the largest number – 375,000 – coming from the tsunami battered shores of South and Southeast Asia. Lured by false promises of good jobs or simply kidnapped, trafficking victims soon find themselves chained to a life of forced labor, domestic servitude, illegal adoption or sexual exploitation.

Traffickers feed directly on fear, crisis, poverty and despair – elements that at this moment are more widespread in Asia than ever. The chaos created by the tsunami can only boost the prospects of a thriving global trade that has grown from a \$1.5 to \$2 billion a year industry in the 1980s to an \$8 to \$9 billion industry today. Human trafficking is the third most profitable crime after drugs and weapons smuggling.

The Adoption Conundrum

Yet the efforts to crack down on illegal trafficking are also likely to have a chilling effect on legal adoptions. To combat widespread trafficking, authorities in Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka have slapped temporary bans on international adoption of tsunami orphans, and are considering a similar move on the domestic front as dangers more close to home begin to emerge. Dozens of cases have surfaced in Sri Lanka of desperate adults snatching up orphans in impromptu adoptions. At a hospital in Kalmunai, nine women showed up to claim a small baby boy pulled from the Indian Ocean. Police were called in after one woman threatened to kill a doctor on duty and another threatened to commit suicide if the baby wasn't handed over.

So it's no wonder that even ardent advocates of adoption rights like Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana support a temporary ban. "This was a very wise move, as long as it is temporary, as the international system of adoption wasn't structured in a way that would effectively prevent improper adoptions," she says.

Landrieu, who visited Sri Lanka last week and is herself a mother of two adopted children, also supports the policy of Asian governments that favors keeping the tsunami orphans within their extended families or their communities as a first choice. "Children need a lot of things, but nothing more than a nurturing parent or family member. If they are unavailable then friends or local community members are the next best options for children who have lost so much," she says.

The plight of the tsunami orphans reveals just how long and perilous the road to recovery will be in the months and years to come, as the international relief effort struggles to rebuild not just buildings or roads, but shattered lives of survivors. "These children have suffered so much, while so young, they deserve to be with their families, with people who love them," says UNICEF's Keele. "We are going to work with local authorities to do everything possible to make that happen."

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