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NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Girls For Sale

POIPET, Cambodia

One thinks of slavery as an evil confined to dusty sepia photographs. But there are 21st-century versions of slaves as well, girls like Srey Neth.

I met Srey Neth, a lovely, giggly wisp of a teenager, here in the wild smuggling town of Poipet in northwestern Cambodia. Girls here are bought and sold, but there is an important difference compared with the 19th century: many of these modern slaves will be dead of AIDS by their 20's.

Some 700,000 people are trafficked around the world each year, many of them just girls. They form part of what I believe will be the paramount moral challenge we will face in this century: to address the brutality that is the lot of so many women in the developing world. Yet it's an issue that gets little attention and that most American women's groups have done shamefully little to address.

Poipet, 220 miles on bouncy roads from Phnom Penh, is a dusty collection of dirt alleys lined with brothels, where teenage girls clutch at any man walking by. It has a reputation as one of the wildest places in Cambodia, an anything-goes town ruled by drugs, gangs, gambling and prostitution.

The only way to have access to the girls is to appear to be a customer. So I put out the word that I wanted to meet young girls and stayed at the seedy \$8-a-night Phnom Pich Guest House — and a woman who is a pimp soon brought Srey Neth to my room.

Srey Neth claimed to be 18 but looked several years younger. She insisted at first (through my Khmer interpreter) that she was free and not controlled by the guesthouse. But soon she told her real story: a female cousin had arranged her sale and taken her to the guesthouse. Now she was sharing a room with three other prostitutes, and they were all pimped to guests.

"I can walk around in Poipet, but only with a close relative of the owner," she said. "They keep me under close watch. They do not let me go out alone. They're afraid I would run away."

Why not try to escape at night? "They would get me back, and something bad would happen. Maybe a beating. I heard that when a group of girls tried to escape, they locked them in the rooms and beat them up." "What about the police?" I asked. "Couldn't you call out to the police for help?"

"The police wouldn't help me because they get bribes from the broth-

At Cambodian brothels, the price of freedom.

el owners," Srey Neth said, adding that senior police officials had come to the guesthouse for sex with her.

I asked Srey Neth how much it would cost to buy her freedom. She named an amount equivalent to \$150.

"Do you really want to leave?" I asked. "Are you sure you wouldn't come back to this?"

She had been watching TV and listlessly answering my questions. Now she turned abruptly and snorted. "This is a hell," she said sharply, speaking with passion for the first time. "You think I want to do this?"

Another girl, Srey Mom, grabbed at me as I walked down the street. She wouldn't let go, tugging me toward the inner depths of her brothel — but she looked so young and pitiable that I couldn't help thinking that she really wanted me to tug her away.

So I did. I paid the owner \$8 to spring her for the evening and then took her away for an interview. (Photographs of both girls are at www.nytimes.com/kristof.)

The owner let Srey Mom go out unsupervised, it turned out, partly because she had been a prostitute for several years and was trusted to return — and partly because her dark complexion meant that she was of little value anyway. The brothel sold her to men for just \$2.50, compared with the \$10 commanded by the lighter-skinned Srey Neth.

I asked Srey Mom what her freedom would cost. Payment of about \$70 in debts to her brothel owner, she said. Two girls in her brothel had been freed after they found boyfriends who paid their debts, she said, and she spoke of her longing to see her sisters and the rest of her family in her village on the other side of Cambodia.

"Do you really want to leave the brothel?" I asked.

"I love myself," she answered simply. "I do not want to let my life be destroyed by what I'm doing now."

That's when I made a firm decision I'd been toying with for some time: I would try to buy freedom for these two girls and return them to their families. I'll tell you in my column on Wednesday what happens next. □

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Death and the City



By Wilson H. Beebe Jr.

Unless you're going to spontaneously combust like Krook in Dickens's "Bleak House," something must be done with you when you die in New York, and that something requires a document. At some point, your name and Social Security number must cross a Health Department desk.

Without a certified death certificate, survivors cannot begin probate

New York needs to update the way it registers the dead.

on a will, make claims on life insurance policies, apply for Social Security benefits, or perform a host of other tasks involving the business of life.

Obtaining a death certificate is the responsibility of the funeral director. Because of New York's antiquated death registration system, it can take two to six months to get one. In that time, families suffer financially since they can't get survivors' benefits and insurance payments. Unfortunately, the city is doing little to make things easier. Last month, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg vetoed a City Council measure that would have required New York to adopt an electronic death registration system, vastly speeding the process, by October 2006.

Wilson H. Beebe Jr. is the executive director of the Metropolitan Funeral Directors Association.

The main problem with the current system is that with about 60,000 deaths per year, it is nearly impossible for one office to deal politely or efficiently with all the people who come in for death certificates. Yet right now, the Office of Vital Records at 125 Worth Street is pretty much the only place one can go to complete the record-keeping requirements for death certification. (It wasn't always

this way. A decade ago, there were five places one could file, but then they were closed as part of budget cutting.)

And just gathering all the documentation the city requires is time-consuming. A doctor has to certify the cause of death, but getting to a doctor who can — or will — sign the death certificate and identify the causes of death can be difficult. There are also benign cases that

The Citizen Astronaut

By Greg Klerkx

LONDON
In his account of the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing, "Of a Fire on the Moon," Norman Mailer describes a telling moment that is pointedly relevant to NASA as it moves out of the glow of President Bush's announcement of a grand new space program and into the cold reality of trying to make it happen. At Mission Control, in the aftermath of Neil Armstrong's "one small step," delirious cheering has given way to smiling contentment as NASA personnel bask in the satisfaction of their achievement. But among the reporters present, Apollo's lustre had already faded. "By an hour and a half of the moon walk they were bored," Mailer writes. "Some were actually slipping out."

The journalists at Mission Control weren't the only ones quickly bored by Apollo. The Apollo 13 mission wasn't even televised nationally; only when it ran into life-threatening trouble did the networks — and the American public — pay attention. The architects of Mr. Bush's new space plan must surely hope that their audience is more steadfast. Yet if that is to be the case, the White House and NASA must take a hard look at what, beyond cold war competitiveness, first excited the American public about going into space: the real allure of space is personal.

The appeal of space travel has

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always been twofold. It is not merely about exploration; it's also about experience. Ever since the dawn of the Apollo program, NASA has done an admirable job of promoting the scientific excitement of space flight. Now it must do more to engage Americans directly. To fulfill the

Will NASA let people like me travel to Mars?

promise of the space age, everyone should have a chance to go into space.

To many people this idea will seem just this side of kooky. Many surveys over the last two decades, however, have shown that a surprisingly large segment of the population is willing to pay for a trip into space if transportation at a reasonable cost and with reasonable assurances of safety is available.

It was not so long ago that NASA cheerfully boasted that the shuttle would revolutionize travel — into space and on Earth as well. Ultimately, the shuttle was to have served as the template for spacecraft that could take ordinary citizens to and from orbit, just for the thrill of it, and would also make possible such trips as a one-hour flight from New York to Paris.

These days, unfortunately, the shuttle is not the best advertisement

for space travel of any kind. More important, NASA has never really accepted the idea that space travel should be for anyone but professional astronauts. The agency did all it could, for instance, to stop a businessman, Dennis Tito, from visiting the International Space Station in 2001.

Underlying NASA's resistance is a fundamental disdain for sully the human space flight enterprise with the brassy sheen of commerce. But this is backward thinking. Was Charles Lindbergh any less inspirational because he was, to put it bluntly, an aerial privateer chasing a cash prize?

President Bush's Mars initiative neatly places NASA's goal of exploration in the public spotlight. Now the agency needs to allow the rest of us to participate.

As it shoots for the moon, NASA should provide material encouragement to entrepreneurs who are making progress in developing human-rated spacecraft for popular use. It should also create incentive programs to reduce the cost of launching things into orbit, which is still the biggest challenge, and thus the greatest cost, in space flight. Name a price per pound: if a company can meet it, give it the money. That would help both NASA and the embryonic "space tourism" industry.

Revising the idea of popular human space flight requires more than a presidential mandate. It requires a cultural shift at NASA, its contractors and its political guardians. But if ever there were a moment for NASA to be bold, it is now.

If human space flight can make a

must go through the chief medical examiner: cremation requires special authorization and all residential deaths must also pass through his office before the certification process can proceed.

There are also complications, like public administrator cases for people who die without survivors and for indigents, both of which require slightly different procedures. The determined funeral director must follow the death certification through each process. Eventually, with documentation in hand, funeral directors approach the window at 125 Worth Street with genuine trepidation. You never know what you're going to get: a burial or cremation permit and no certificate; a certified death certificate; or, the worst case, "bounced" all the way back to the beginning.

Maybe they bounce you because you used the wrong color ink or because the time of death was given in 24-hour time or because they think the causes of death are unacceptable. There are primary (or underlying) causes of death, followed by secondary and tertiary ones, and the clerk on duty may take a dislike to one of them. Getting bounced can mean starting the death certification process all over again — although, usually, the person on duty will relent and issue a burial permit in spite of an error (but he won't give you the necessary "certified copies" until corrections have been made).

In 1994, the Metropolitan Funeral Directors Association came up with a solution: put the process online, allowing doctors, funeral directors and medical examiners to file their information over the Internet, forever eliminating the need for anyone to go to 125 Worth. Mistakes could be fixed quickly. Burial permits could be sent out electronically and certified copies could follow via overnight mail.

Such a system would eliminate the vagaries of the current process, improve the quality and timeliness of public health data, save the city a small fortune in personnel costs and spare families the agony of waiting months for a certified certificate when the process goes awry.

Based in part on our recommendations, the Department of Health started to develop an electronic system with I.B.M. in 1998. Six years and more than \$10 million later, as shown in an audit by the city's comptroller, every initiative has been misdirected, stalled, objected to and worked around.

Meanwhile, New Jersey, which began to develop a system about the same time as New York City, officially began to use electronic death registration this year.

It's possible for New York City to catch up. The city says it indeed will develop an electronic system, but it hasn't set any deadlines — Mayor Bloomberg's main stated objections to the bill he vetoed were that it usurped his authority and set an unrealistic time line. But without some sort of targets, we may face another decade of inactivity.

Unless the city begins to modernize the way it does business, 125 Worth Street may have to register a few more deaths — when frustrated funeral directors, like Krook, spontaneously combust. □

Stephen Savage

DAVID BROOKS

My Crossover Vote

Conservatives like me don't get a vote in Democratic primaries, but we do have an interest. Even we frothing right-wingers know that the country needs a serious and responsible Democratic Party to counter the Republicans when they need countering, and beat them when they need beating.

So with the first actual votes about to be cast, I've been figuring out whom to root for. I've graded the candidates in three categories.

INTEGRITY/LEADERSHIP By this stage in the 1992 race, Bill Clinton's character flaws were already evident. None of this year's candidates seem to have any of those sorts of problems. But are they true to their convictions? Would they improve the tone in Washington?

Gephardt, A He's a man of integrity, who, putting his career at risk, has stuck tenaciously to his positions on the war, trade and the working class. Also, he's an experienced and fair-minded legislator.

Lieberman, A Nobody has faced more hostile crowds. Nobody has more experience building bipartisan coalitions. He has problems looking presidential.

Edwards, A Much more substantive than he seems at first. He is offended by cultural elitism, the besetting sin of national Democrats.

Kerry, B Turned fuzzy when chal-

From the sidelines, the Democratic field looks strong.

lenged. Personally aloof, he may have trouble building coalitions.

Clark, C Two years ago, he lauded Bush and his "great team." Now he savages them with loopy conspiracy theories. Who is this guy and why aren't more of his military colleagues enthusiastic supporters?

Dean, F He's vague about what he's for, but he's venomous toward anyone who disagrees with him. If elected, political discourse would sink to new lows.

DOMESTIC POLICY Democratic proposals have grown more ambitious and expensive as the revenue to pay for them has grown scarce. Most of these plans, especially middle-class tax increases, would have no chance in a Republican or closely divided Congress. We'd be left with modest, overlapping proposals. High marks here go for any hint of creativity.

Lieberman, A One of the last free-trading Democrats, he would carry on where Clinton left off, with tax credits for high-tech innovation and the like.

Kerry, A His bold plans for energy independence and national service should inspire the next president, whoever he is.

Edwards, A Has the most detailed proposals. He focuses his attention on lower-skilled workers, who have seen their incomes stagnate.

Clark, B Has embraced generic but responsible Democratic ideas. Little that is daring or dangerous.

Dean, C On the stump, he rejects Clintonite centrism; in Vermont he exemplified it. If he won, who would serve: Governor Dean or Candidate Dean?

Gephardt, F Would capitalize on rising protectionist sentiment in the G.O.P. to erect trade barriers, setting off ferocious conflicts with the rest of the world and impoverishing workers here and abroad.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS The foreign policy debate has been absurdly backward-looking: how many angels can dance on the head of an Iraq resolution? High grades here go to those who are not merely reacting against Bush, but have their own view of the threats and opportunities we face.

Gephardt, A Deeply affected by 9/11. He believes in aggressive action to prevent further attacks.

Lieberman, A No other candidate has thought so much about Islamic fascism, and how to counter it.

Clark, B Of all the candidates, he's the most wedded to multilateral institutions. One may disagree, but it's hard not to be impressed by the sophistication of his thinking.

Edwards, B He voted for the war but then, in the face of political pressure, against the \$87 billion required to continue it.

Kerry, B His instincts are slightly hawkish. The question is whether he would be able to make a tough decision, then stick to it.

Dean, C His advisers and speeches are on the dovish side, but he claims that his instincts, despite his Iraq war stand, are hawkish. Screaming to a crowd, he's Kucinich; talking to a small group, he's Kerry.

My Democratic friends complain, but this is a pretty strong field of candidates. I fear Dean's temperament and Gephardt's trade policy. But if any of the other guys were elected, the country would be fine, and we right-wingers would still find plenty to fume about. □

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