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SUBHEADLINE: `When the finger points at the moon, the idiot looks at the finger' goes a saying popular in France. Celebrities who take up a cause often find that it is they, and not their mission, which attracts the attention of the general public. Emmanuelle Beart (of `Manon des Sources' and `Mission: Impossible' fame) is hoping she'll be able to disprove the proverb

BYLINE: Story by

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Back in the early 1980s she used to stand all day on the Place Saint-Michel in Paris selling badges to raise money for orphans afflicted by deadly illnesses. Then, she might attract, at most, the attention of a few charitable passers-by.

These days when she travels around the world to highlight the plight of sexually exploited children, she is accompanied by a horde of reporters and cameramen, while, back home in France, a legion of fans continue to hang onto her words.

So what happened in-between these two scenarios, separated by a gap in time of nearly 20 years? The young voluntary social worker has been transformed into a celebrity, an actress of international renown whose rise to fame is due to the immense success of Manon des Sources, the sequel to Jean de Florette, which earned her the Cesar award for Best Supporting Actress in 1987.

This shy lady from the provinces is now festooned with a multitude of awards, and tags as diverse as ``the sexiest French woman and the fourth sexiest woman in the world'' (Paris Match, 1994), ``the ``lady-god of French cinema'' (an anonymous correspondent), ``a truly angelic, cerebral French beauty'' (Elle, 1996).

But, make no mistake, flattery of this sort has not gone to her head, nor has the fact that her every movement is closely watched by a string of journalists. Emmanuelle Beart is still a modest woman. And she is still stunningly beautiful. A slip of a woman, she has toffee-coloured hair, a flawless complexion, huge, deep, blue eyes, full lips, prominent cheek bones \_ and a genuine concern for deprived people.

``The problem with actresses and famous people is that they are always being forced to justify themselves. People are constantly asking questions like `but why is she doing that?' They go all out to try and find some kind of weird reasons to explain our behaviour.''

Beart was speaking at a press conference held last week at the National Youth Bureau in Bangkok. She was here in her capacity as a ``goodwill ambassador'' for Unicef, a position she has held since 1996. Every year she spares a few months from a busy acting career to do the type of work she has always felt close to \_ helping the underprivileged.

``I feel outraged that approximately three-quarters of the people living on this planet are facing starvation. Of course, I experience this same feeling of indignation when I think of the injustices perpetrated in my own country ... and, God knows, everything there is far from being perfect either.''

Beart was a member of Unicef missions to Mauritania in June 1996, Vietnam in February 1998 and Mali in January 1998. She was in Thailand recently to look closely into the fate of sexually exploited children and the general issue of child protection.

But, right from the start, she was careful to dot her ``i''s and cross her ``t''s.

``No, I'm not doing this for publicity ... I don't need any more publicity. And no, I'm not here for such and such a reason either. Don't try to find any reason other my personal motivation to do this kind of work, I'm here as a citizen of the world, as a woman, as a mother ...'' The passion in Beart's voice leaves one in no doubt about her commitment to the cause.

Nor, when one looks deeper into her background, is her genuineness in doubt either. Born on August 14, 1965, the daughter of Russian-Spanish singer-songwriter Guy Beart, and Genevieve Galea, a woman of Italian and Greek ancestry, she, her sister and three brothers grew up in a tiny village in the south of France. From an early age, the children were taught the virtues of sharing and generosity \_ lessons which were to make a lasting impression on the young Emmanuelle.

``My mother was a grassroots activist. She was profoundly involved in social work. During my childhood, broken people ... drop-outs would often turn up at our home. We weren't terribly well-off but my mother would always give these people shelter and try to help them. She had a very strong sense of justice and injustice and, somehow, this `virus' was passed onto us.''

We are sitting in the spacious lobby of the President Hotel and Beart is having a well-earned rest after a long and tiring day spent visiting various child-rescue centres around Bangkok.

She continues: ``Long before I started my career as an actress, I got involved in social work. I don't believe in altruism as such \_ for me, it's more of a compulsion ... something I must do. Why do I feel it to be such a necessity? Well, that's a part of a secret garden I don't want to cross just now. Anyway, I'm not here to talk about myself.''

Although, before she left this point to one side, Beart did carry her reasoning through to a conclusion.

``I had the privilege of being born in one of the 10 most wealthy countries on the planet. On top of that, I had the chance to benefit from a wide range of services ... healthcare, education, culture, etcetera ... which many people, even in France itself, are deprived of. So, finding myself in this privileged position, I don't see how I could have acted otherwise; it's really the least I could have done. If I hadn't, how would I have been able to wake up in the morning and look at myself in the mirror? Should I have told myself something like: `Wow, what a fantastic life you're having. But better take care \_ don't look around!. You'd better close your eyes or else

you'll see other people suffering.' No, I really couldn't have thought things like that.

``My parents passed their concern for other people on to me. That's just the way it is, I don't deserve any credit for the way I've turned out.''

Well, if anything is to be said in Beart's favour, it is to point out that if she hadn't been endowed with a will of iron she would never have been able to further her parents' vision, given the numerous obstacles she's had to overcome in the years since.

``[As a celebrity] I'm always being watched, so people might think, 'how is she capable of observing others?' But, as an actress, how would I be able to give life to a character if I wasn't able to watch and pay attention to others?''

And ``observing'' is a key part of her function on this, her latest trip as a Unicef ``goodwill ambassador \_ a term which she finds ``cold and solemn'' and for which she would rather substitute ``godmother''. She says she was here primarily to play the roles of witness and catalyst.

Over to Alain Grumberg, information director with Unicef Paris:  
``There are no rigid requirements concerning the function of goodwill ambassadors. They're just very just prominent personalities, people with recognised talents, who are asked to bear witness, to testify on the facts of a particular problem in their own way, using their own words. They're not out to bring tears to people's eyes but to help people realise ... to alert them to the realities of a given issue.''

Earlier, at a press conference called to report on Beart's findings after seven days on the road, she had this to say: ``I'm not here to make big speeches, nor am I here to judge. I'm basically here to watch, to absorb, to imbibe, and also to try and understand the factors that can lead to the exploitation of children. But it is still too soon to make any comment. First, I need to sit back and distance myself from what I've seen.

``I'm not here as an economist, a politician, an ethnologist, a philosopher or a journalist.. I come here, above all, as a woman and a mother. But I

know what I want to do, as well as whom I want to reach.'

To address the specific issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children:

Unicef estimates that between 24,000 and 40,000 children at the very least are involved in the sex industry here (12,000 to 18,000 children according to the Department of Public Welfare); according to Unicef, between 15 and 20 percent of the total number of sex workers (see sidebar).

'People can think whatever they want, yet it is essential that they are confronted with the reality of the situation. Consider the case of upcountry families selling their children into the flesh trade. 'How awful', you might exclaim, but then you meet the family, you see the condition in which they live, you get a hint, for example, of the sense of sacrifice that some children feel towards their parents ... and, as a result, you don't condemn them in the same way.'

Speaking directly to those \_ not just Westerners but also Asian tourists and

Thais themselves \_ who prey on pre-pubescent youngsters, Beart continued:

'I want people to put a name, a story, a face on these children whom they use as objects.'

Uncertainty, in terms of figures and trends, permeated the whole mission:

'The problem is very complex and there are so many factors to be taken into account,' Beart said. 'With new laws and regulations being implemented, at national and international levels, we know that paedophiles are now tending to move to other places in the region such as Cambodia or Laos, and that it is becoming increasingly difficult to track them.'

During their time in the Kingdom, Beart and Alain Grumberg, liaised with Gamini Abeysekera from the Unicef Office for Thailand. The pair were accompanied on their fact-finding mission by journalists from France 2, the French TV channel, Elle magazine and Le Monde, the daily newspaper.

The delegation first paid a visit to Pattaya to look into the situation of disadvantaged and exploited children there, before travelling up North to the following locations in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces: The Women's Skills Development Centre, New Life Centre, Home for Victims of Commercial

Sexual Exploitation, the Youth Career Development Project, Women's and Children's Rights Protection Centre and the Centre for Girls. Later the team visited the Centre for the Protection of Child Rights (aka Baan Oon Rak) in the suburbs of Bangkok.

Reflecting on the seven-day mission, Gamini Abeysekera had this to say:

``This visit was a very special event. As an actress, Emmanuelle wanted to understand, experience and even live in the shoes of the children she saw as being disadvantaged and exploited. As a mother, she wanted to see how parents and adults treat and protect children with love and care ... above and beyond meeting material needs such as food, nutrition, health, housing, education, et cetera. While, as a woman, she tried to project herself into the future of young girls pressured or lured into undesirable jobs such as the sex trade and other forms of abuse and exploitation. As a human being, she showed her emotions about and passion for the dignity, respect and value of children. Finally, I would say as a Unicef goodwill ambassador, she was determined to continue her mission to spread the message that children are the future, that their rights and needs must be protected and promoted by all people \_ be they be locals or Asian or Western tourists.''

On their return to France, Beart and Grumberg will call a second press conference back in France. The actress herself will contribute to an article for publication in Elle magazine and give a report on a programme on French TV named Envoye Special .

``I won't hide behind journalists,' ' Beart assured us. ``I want to give my own personal testimony. I think I have seen and read almost everything related to the topic of children sexual exploitation. Contrary to most features which condemn but at the same time, somehow, incite ... I truly believe that my version won't [do this].''

Back in France, Beart will also edit and put the finishing touches to a TV documentary on child sexual exploitation shot during her seven days in the Kingdom.

She says the topic is sure to haunt her for quite some time to come.

``I don't know how to protect myself [from memories of the suffering she encountered]. Perhaps, subconsciously I still don't want to ... Yet in the long run, I might have to learn to protect myself, otherwise I'll end up getting completely worn out. Certainly, the door I opened by coming here will be extremely difficult to shut again. I will find it very hard to go back home and switch to another reality. But when the day comes that I am able to look at all this with total self-control, with a cold eye, then I'll know that it is really time to stop.''

A major growth industry

According to a report released just two days ago by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), the number of child prostitutes in the Mekong sub-region now constitutes one third of the total number of sex workers; the younger the child, the more likely it is that he or she was forced into the trade. The report, ``Children on the Edge: Protecting Children from Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in East Asia and the Pacific'', says that surveys indicate that 30 to 35 per cent of all sex workers in the Mekong sub-region (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Laos and the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi) are between 12 and 17 years of age.

The report notes that the sex industry has become such a huge money spinner in this region that the International Labour Organisation estimates that in Thailand alone, it accounts for between 14 and 16 percent of gross domestic product.

According to Unicef, most of the sex workers in Thailand come from the northern and northeastern provinces. And the number of under-age prostitutes from Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Yunnan who are operating in the Kingdom is on the increase.

According to another report prepared by ECPAT International last October for the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, the number of child prostitutes in Thailand increased by roughly 20 percent in a single year \_ between 1998 and 1999.

``The demand for child prostitutes from both Thai men and foreigners, including tourists, is still high,' ' the report reads. ``Western European men are among the most numerous sex tourists in Bangkok and Chon Buri. Malaysians and Singaporeans make up the highest percentage of foreign tourists in southern Thailand.

``Thailand is a substantial receiver country, as well as a transit and sender country. As Thailand's economy is relatively more prosperous than most others in the region, many children are lured to Thailand under false pretences of employment. Children are trafficked to Thailand from Cambodia, through Koh Kong and Poipet, from Laos, Burma and China. Thai girls are trafficked into Cambodia and further afield to Europe, Japan, Taiwan, North America, South Africa and Australia.

``Child pornography is a problem that is getting notice only recently. Victims include child prostitutes, child beggars and street children.' '