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EX-MARINE GUILTY OF USING DRUGS AND FORCE TO HAVE SEX WITH YOUNG GIRLS IN CAMBODIA

LOS ANGELES – Concluding a three-week trial, a federal jury today convicted a retired Marine Corps captain who traveled to Cambodia for the purpose of engaging in illicit sexual conduct with minors.

Michael Joseph Pepe, 54, a resident of Oxnard, faces up to 210 years in federal prison as a result of the guilty verdicts on seven felony counts.

During the trial, government prosecutors presented testimony from six of the seven girls that Pepe sexually abused. The girls, who at the time of the abuse were between the ages of 9 and 12, testified that Pepe drugged, bound, beat and raped them. Several victims testified that Pepe required them to give him sexual massages and perform oral sex on him on a daily basis.

In addition to victim testimony, prosecutors presented corroborating evidence seized by the Cambodian National Police from Pepe's Phnom Penh residence, including rope and cloth strips used to restrain the victims, Rohypnol and other sedatives, and homemade child pornography.

The prostitute who acted as Pepe's broker testified on videotape about bringing him young victims. Pepe paid the broker and the victims' families for unlimited access to the victims.

Pepe is scheduled to be sentenced on September 3 by United States District Judge Dale S. Fischer

"Predators such as Mr. Pepe should realize that their unspeakable acts will not go unpunished, even if committed in other countries," said United States Attorney Thomas P. O'Brien. "Child exploitation crimes are among the most important cases we prosecute. Wherever the young victims of these crimes are located, they must be protected from people like Mr. Pepe."

Robert Schoch, special agent in charge of the ICE office of investigations in Los Angeles, stated: "Today's verdict is particularly gratifying and not surprising given the horrendous evidence introduced during this trial about the defendant's sexual exploitation of these vulnerable youths. This case represented one of the most egregious examples of international sex tourism we have ever investigated and the jury's verdict is a reminder that pedophiles who attempt to evade detection and prosecution by committing sex crimes overseas face serious consequences."

Joe D. Morton, Director of the Diplomatic Security Service, commented: "The Diplomatic Security (DS) maintains an excellent working relationship with ICE and local Cambodian law enforcement personnel who coordinated and collaborated with the DS Regional Security Officer in Phnom Penh about Pepe, thus enabling the capture," said "It's this type of close, worldwide law enforcement liaison that gives the Diplomatic Security the unparalleled ability to assist in locating, pursuing and apprehending predatory criminals."

The investigation in this case was conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Cambodian National Police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service.

Pepe is the fifth person to be prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office for the Central District of California on child sex tourism charges under the provisions of the PROTECT Act, which took effect five years ago. The PROTECT Act substantially strengthened federal laws against predatory crimes involving children outside the United States by adding new crimes and increasing sentences.

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