

Sa Pa kids work in sub-zero weather

By [Tat Dinh](#) January 12, 2021 / 10:32 am GMT+7



Small children follow tourists to sell trinkets and other goods in Sa Pa, Lao Cai Province, January 9, 2021. Photo by VnExpress/Tat Dinh.

As midnight approached in Sa Pa, many kids were out on the streets, hawking goods to tourists in freezing conditions.

"Please buy for me, please, please!" begged a little girl, barely five, carrying a sibling on her back. Her hands were held out in desperation as cold wind battered her tiny frame. Her face was red and cracked, her body shielded by a flimsy jacket with an extra layer of plastic film.

A three-year-old girl next to her was running around and tugging at the sleeves of passersby, beseeching them to buy some of their satchels and dolls for VND10,000 (43 US cents).

As hundreds of tourists walked the streets of the northern highlands town dressed in thick coats and wool scarves, well insulated as the mercury dropped to minus one degree Celsius last Saturday, scantily clad small children were hawking their wares. Just 20 meters from where the little children moved out, a group of women was gathered around a fire for warmth as they knit clothes. When there were no prospective customers around, the little girls ran to the warmth of the fire. But when tourists ask the women about the girls' conditions, they only shook their heads in response.

"It's so cold outside that even adults can't bear it. It's pitiful to see the girls like this, I want to help them, even if it is little," said 38-year-old Nguyen Binh Ca from Hanoi as he took out his wallet.

Immediately afterwards, three or four kids swarmed around and begged him to buy from them as well.

Even as Ca put his wallet away, an announcement blared from a speaker on a vehicle patrolling the Sa Pa Ward. Tran Dinh Tho, head of an inspection team, was driving through the area, blasting messages from loudspeakers, asking tourists not to buy goods from local kids to prevent them from being exploited.

"Not buying goods from them will help protect the children's rights," the announcement said.

Little children begging/hawking on the streets of Sa Pa in Lao Cai Province has been a common sight for a long time, as it has been in other tourist hotspots across the country.

And, as in other localities, Lao Cai authorities have also begun asking tourists to stop buying goods from the little children, saying parents were taking advantage of tourists' compassion to force their children to hawk things even in harsh weather conditions.

Poverty-stricken families

Vuong Trinh Quoc, Chairman of Sa Pa, said that at peak times, there could be as many as 500 children out on the streets, pestering tourists. Authorities have tried numerous ways to stop it, including using loudspeakers mounted on cars or vans, asking people to desist from buying anything from local kids and also trying to persuade parents not to make their children sell things, but nothing has worked. Many kids are still on the streets.

"We've listened to the people. Some either don't have jobs or are paid too little, so they've simply stopped working in the fields. Others feel that selling things on the street can bring in more money, so they make their children do it," he said, adding a lot of the poor people asking kids to work on the streets live in downtown communes like Hoang Lien, Muong Hoa, Ta Van and Ta Phin.

Authorities have tried helping some residents become vendors and others to pursue jobs in the tourism and services industry. They have also given out agriculture loans. But, "to put a complete stop to children selling things on the streets, their parents must have stable jobs," said Quoc, adding that local authorities were trying to boost community tourism and artisanship so more people can join the workforce.

Sa Pa, a major tourist destination in Vietnam, receives around three million visitors every year. About 65,000 people visited the town during the latest New Year holiday.