

Cambodian NGOs out of control



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Hunger for money is likely a universal affliction but the disease appears to have reached an advanced stage and epidemic proportions in Cambodia. The great deal of money that flows to Cambodian NGOs to fight human trafficking, prostitution, and pedophilia creates perverse incentives. The money is flowing into a dysfunctional system. The corrupt institutions at the feeding trough include not only the police and the judiciary but the NGOs. In their zeal for funding, the NGOs appear to have lost their moral compass. It looks as if that they have been reduced to nothing more than grotesque money-hungry machines that are out of control.

According to reports in the media, the NGOs are not above violence, bribery, coercion, extortion, and outright manipulation of the criminal justice system to achieve the kind of results that will bring in the donor dollars. The NGOs work hand in glove with the judiciary and the police by bringing them rich foreigners and lucrative bribery and extortion opportunities. Extortive bribery is apparently the norm especially when the smell of money is strong.

One NGO reportedly attacked a brothel using bribed policemen and kidnapped scores of women and held them against their will in what they called a rehabilitation center only to see the ladies escape and return to the brothel. The modus operandi of another NGO is reported to include coercion of alleged victims of sex crimes to get them to cooperate in extortion conspiracies. Reportedly, the girls have been promised huge payoffs that they expect to extort from foreigners with deep pockets. It appears that all the actors in these cases are intoxicated by deep pockets.

The lure of a deep pocket rather than pedophilia is the real issue apparently. In all of the high profile cases where NGOs became involved in alleged pedophilia cases, the accused was a foreigner with proven access to mucho dinero. More than 90% of the customers in the sex industry in Cambodia are Khmer. Criminal sex cases involving Khmers are mostly settled quietly out of court and involve a payment of around \$100 to \$200 by the accused to the victim. If the accused is a farang, and he smells like money, the NGOs get involved and a settlement amount of \$10,000 and up is demanded.

The scary part is that none of this would have come to light had the Ford, Knuchel, and Betteridge cases not blown up in their face and if the Cleghorn case had not been critically evaluated by the Far Eastern Economic Review. In all of these cases, the lure of big money, either from donors or from the accused, played a role.

Yes, there are pedophiles in Cambodia that break Cambodian laws with respect to sex with minors. Yes, they should be apprehended and brought to justice whether they are Khmer or farang. However, the cure being offered to Cambodia by the NGOs and in league with the corrupt criminal justice system is worse than the disease.

I believe that the real problem in Cambodia is not child-sex but a combination of poverty and illiteracy. That's what's broke and it is what needs to be fixed. Until it is fixed, for each girl one rescues from the sex industry, there will be a hundred waiting to be sold by their parents. Quixotic battles against the symptoms of poverty may put on a good show for donors but it does not do Cambodia any good in the long run.

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