

NATIONAL

Court To Order Girl's Return in Abuse Case

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Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Thursday said it will order child rights workers to return a 14-year-old girl to her parents, one week after she was taken into custody following allegations that she was abused by an Austrian man since she was 9.

Staff at the child protection NGO Action Pour les Enfants took the girl into custody following a police raid Nov 6 on the Phnom Penh hotel room of Ernst Ivankowitsch, 73. The girl was discovered naked, and Ivankowitsch was caught on videotape by police clad only in his underwear.

Lawyers for the NGO were seeking custody of the girl, claiming that her parents were complicit in their daughter's abuse and that they had inflated the girl's age to 16 to ensure Ivankowitsch's release from court last Friday.

"She will return home," Investigating Judge Kim Sophorn said after interviewing the girl at the court on Thursday.

"I will let her go home [Friday] after I talk with the prosecutor. She told me she volunteered to sleep with that man, and she told me that she is 16 years old," Kim Sophorn said.

Child rights workers and a lawyer—appointed by Action Pour les Enfants—representing the girl, claimed Thursday the girl was pressured into inflating her age.

"During her stay at [the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center] she spoke frankly and happily that she was 14," CWCC monitor Nop Sarin Sreiroth said at the courthouse. "Just a few minutes after meeting her mother she changed the confession," Nop Sarin Sreiroth said.

Kim Sophorn made the Nov 7

decision to release Ivankowitsch after the girl's parents presented documents claiming their daughter was 16. The girl's mother, Meung Mach, and father, Bun Man, told reporters Sunday their daughter was, in fact, 14 and they had misinformed the court because they were "confused" and wanted the suspect released.

Bin Lorn, chief of Boeng Tumpun commune in Meanchey district, also stated in a letter on Thursday that he was pressured by the mother to write the letter stating the girl was 16.

Hout Sophorn, the lawyer working on behalf of the girl, issued letters on Thursday asking embassies in Phnom Penh to help keep Ernst Ivankowitsch in Cambodia by not issuing him entry visas to their countries.

Ivankowitsch's whereabouts are not known, Hout Sophorn said.