

NATIONAL

British Man Accused of Sex Crimes Released

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Local human rights group Licadho expressed outrage on Monday that a British national accused of sexually abusing children at the Lighthouse Orphanage in Phnom Penh was allowed to return to the center on Sunday and Monday, after being released from police custody on Friday.

Michael Leach, 44, was questioned for 10 hours by Phnom Penh municipal anti-trafficking police on Friday after five children, ages 12 to 15, filed a complaint against him.

Keo Thea, deputy police chief of the anti-trafficking and juvenile protection unit, said Monday that Leach is accused of abusing the children and masquerading as a medical doctor.

Leach was brought in for questioning Friday after police went at 8 am to his room at the Flamingo Hotel, but he was released that evening at the request of the orphanage's director, Chea Savy, according to the orphanage's manager, Bin Long.

Nget Sarath, Phnom Penh Municipal Court deputy prosecutor, said Monday that police sent a report on Leach, stating the complaints, and that police found girls' underwear, a bra and a school uniform among Leach's possessions in his hotel room.

Nget Sarath said he had received the police report but no evidence and Leach has not yet been brought to the court for questioning.

"This person was arrested by police on Friday morning in relation to allegations that he posed

as a doctor in order to have access to children at a Phnom Penh orphanage and that he indecently assaulted children there," Licadho director Naly Pilorge said in a statement on Monday.

"We are deeply disturbed that this man is back at this orphanage and should have contact with children in any way at this time," Pilorge said during a telephone interview.

Interviewed at the Lighthouse Orphanage on Monday, Leach admitted that he lied about being a doctor.

"Here's the thing, whether to tell people that I wasn't a qualified doctor and run the risk of not being able to continue to help them or whether to just allow this to continue whilst I treated the children and everyday...seeing them improve," Leach said.

He also admitted to physically examining most of the 15 children who were housed at Lighthouse during his first visit to the orphanage in January 2004 but said the exams were done in the presence of female staff.

"I did examine some children upstairs, especially initially in the first week," he said, adding that the children volunteered to be examined.

Leach, who declined to name his profession other than say he had worked in the leisure industry and British army, demonstrated where he would touch the children when he examined them.

He pointed to his head, neck, chest and stomach. He said the notion of inappropriate touching may have occurred when he prodded an area just above the

groin area of one girl who filed a complaint.

"You can always ask questions of anybody, especially children in a certain way to illicit the sort of answer that you're looking for. 'Were you embarrassed when the doctor touched you?'" Leach said.

Orphanage Director Chea Savy said she was too busy to comment on the case Monday and referred all questions to orphanage staff.

Under scrutiny from rights NGOs and police, the orphanage voluntarily closed in March 2004 on grounds of poor hygiene and inadequate nutrition and security for the children, a Licadho worker said. Around 15 children, none of whom were orphans, were taken from the orphanage and reintegrated with relatives in the provinces. The orphanage reopened a few months later, but with different children, the Licadho staffer said.

Bin Long said Chea Savy bailed Leach out of jail because she knows "he's a very good man and he's a foreigner and cannot stay in prison."

Bin Long said he personally invited Leach back to the orphanage Sunday, following his release from prison.

"I support him," he said. "Why set him up with big problem like this. Later, if [Licadho] always do like this, my orphanage will be closed."

Gary Benham, Vice Consul at the British Embassy, said he is "aware that a British national was detained over the weekend," but would not comment further on the case.