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Rescue as Scam: Australian charity lies about saving girls from sex slavery

Posted By [laura agustin](#) On 25 March 2012 @ 23:03 In [trafficking](#) | [No Comments](#)

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[2] *Sex-slave charity head quits amid row* was the alternate title to this disgraceful story that reminds us that the United States is not alone in playing Rescue Industry hardball. A claim to have saved very young girls from sexual slavery (supposedly shown in this photo) has been repudiated by police in Thailand. The charity's name, [Grey Man](#) [3], suggests some sort of paramilitary identity; their mission, according to their website, is *the rescue of children from traffickers*.

This news story can hardly be counted on for the final facts of this matter, and it may be that the charity is locked in some kind of struggle for power or money with Thai police. But it is creepy enough that an Australian charity should, as they proclaim, **promote the use of former Australian soldiers and police in daring missions to rescue victims of sex trafficking in Asia**. Daring? Why? If any brothels have become dangerous places, rescue raids are surely the reason. The gall! And anyone who describe himself as *daring* is already being ridiculous.

[Rescue boss out over claims of fake 'victims'](#) [4]

Lindsay Murdoch, 26 March 2012, smh.com.au (*Sydney Morning Herald*)

THE head of an Australian charity that has been accused of faking the rescue of Thai hill tribe children from sexual slavery has resigned. Former Australian army commando Sean McBride stepped down from the Grey Man charity at the weekend following **new claims about the organisation and an investigation into the hill tribes children by Thailand's Department of Special Investigation**.

Mr McBride, who also uses the name John Curtis, told *The Age* the Grey Man's board decided he should step down because "personal issues" between him and people in Thailand were interfering with the organisation's operations. **Funded by Australian donations, the high-profile charity promotes the use of former Australian soldiers and police in daring missions to rescue victims** of sex trafficking in Asia.

Police in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai have cut ties with the charity amid claims and counter-claims about the organisation pending the outcome of the departmental investigation. In a new claim, the Grey Man's former head of investigations in Thailand said **the charity's website had exaggerated the success of its operations, including changing the ages of victims.**

"Sean [Mr McBride] told me **younger girls are most interesting for donors,**" said the Thailand-born man, who asked that his name not be published because of his undercover work. **The charity's website often claimed that victims as young as 12 were rescued.**

Responding by email to questions from *The Age* sent before he stepped down, Mr McBride said **he never changed reports "except to make them more readable and media-orientated"**. He said the charity, which last year had about 25 field operatives and was training 20 more, would not put "people on the ground in Thailand until we get the all-clear from the DSI", although its website continues to appeal for donations to support its main objective of "assist[ing] the police in Thailand in locating and rescuing children from trafficking and sexual abuse". He told *The Age* that much of the controversy about the charity he founded in 2007 was about "corruption and vested interests".

The charity says it has rescued dozens of children from prostitution in Asia, the youngest aged 10. It also works on prevention measures such as supporting employment and education programs in an attempt to stop children being trafficked for sexual exploitation. But **the charity has had acrimonious disputes with its operatives in Thailand, including police provided with costs to support its operations.**

Referring to the hill-tribe-children investigation and the Grey Man's critics, Mr McBride said: "Did we rescue 22 children and did we scam the Australian public? They know they are about to lose that one, so they are using half-truths now to try and discredit us in other ways and they will keep trying."

Police from the Chiang Mai-based transnational crime unit told *The Age* that **21 hill tribe children from a village in northern Chiang Rai province were not rescued from prostitution as the charity claimed** on its website along with appeals for funds. The Department of Special Investigation is investigating claims that the children had never left their homes, had continued to attend school and had suffered as a

result of the publicity.

Mr McBride said the Grey Man had provided the department with a comprehensive response to the allegations. "We are fully co-operating with the inquiry," he said. Police also told *The Age* the department is investigating the **Grey Man's alleged use of a fake address in Chiang Mai**. Mr McBride said the address "was a temporary address when we first started".


In responses to questions from *The Age*, Mr McBride defended the use of photographs of hill tribe children on its website above references to children being taken to a brothel. "There don't seem to be many photos of hill tribe kids. If they were sex trade victims they would have their eyes blacked out," he said. "I suppose people could make a connection between those kids and brothels but it was not our intention. I will discuss it with our people, but I think people realise a site like ours will have photos of kids on it."

The former head of Grey Man's 10-person Thai investigation unit said **Australian volunteers who travelled to Thailand to support operations could provide little assistance because they could not speak Thai and had little knowledge of Thai culture**. Mr McBride said the man did not like working with foreigners "so **we had to send our volunteers off to do their own tasks**".

Operations to rescue sex trade workers in Thailand have become highly contentious. The Empower Foundation, which represents sex workers, said in a report released this month that "we have now reached a point where there are more women in the Thai sex industry being abused by anti-trafficking practice than there are women exploited by traffickers". [\[that story here\]](#) [5]

The foundation was not referring specifically to the Grey Man, which is based in Brisbane and has been strongly supported by Australia's legal profession, including judges. The Grey Man board has appointed former Australian Federal Police agent Colin Rowley to replace Mr McBride, who said he will no longer be involved with or comment further on the charity.

-Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist

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