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Police Charge Orphanage Director With Abusing Minors

By *Kaing Menghun* and *Denise Hruby* - March 29, 2013

SIEM REAP CITY – Police have charged the director of an orphanage in Siem Reap with sexually abusing two minors and have sent him to the provincial prison to await trial, an official said Wednesday.

The two female victims in the case, aged 11 and 12, were sent to the local anti-human trafficking NGO Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Precaire (Afesip) over the weekend, said Sao Chhoeurth, Afesip's CEO.

Morn Savuth, director and founder of Angkor Orphan and Education Organization (AOEO), was arrested on Friday after police had received reports from rights group Licadho that two girls had been abused and were sleeping in the same room as Mr. Savuth.

"After we received a report from Licadho, we spent three days investigating the case and went to the center because the prosecutor issued a summons for the director. So we showed him the summons and took him to the police station where he and the girls were questioned," deputy provincial anti-trafficking police chief Cheav Heng said, adding that the orphanage was now deemed safe and had been allowed to be stay open. "We have charged him with indecent acts."

At the AOEO orphanage in Cochran village on Wednesday, a total of 18 children, aged 5 to 18, remained at the center.

Speaking behind bars in the visitors' room at Siem Reap provincial prison, Mr. Savuth on Wednesday protested his innocence and said that while girls had slept in his room, they had not been abused.

"The allegations are unfair, there were never any problems with the children. I wonder if this was a set-up, or if somebody bribed [the girls] to say these things," he said, adding that many children, not just the two girls, had spent nights in his room. "I wonder if this is a bad joke that will make me lose everything," he added.

Chao Leak Vanna, monitor for local human rights group Licadho, who initially investigated the case, said that the abuse had been going on since the orphanage was opened by Mr. Savuth last year.

She also said Licadho's findings were the result of an investigation into a different rape case at the orphanage involving a staff member.

"We were working on another case, where an older man working at AOEO raped the cook," she said. During the investigation, she said she noticed that two girls at the center would never talk and would often be seen inside the director's private room.

"It looked suspicious," Ms. Vanna said, adding that the 12-year-old also said that the director raped her.

Ms. Vanna explained that Licadho had discovered three private Australian donors living in Siem Reap who had stopped funding the center prior to Mr. Savuth's arrest as they had grown suspicious of the director's behavior.

Licadho declined to reveal the identity of the three donors.

AOEO education director Chuon Nan on Wednesday rejected the allegations against his former boss.

He also alleged that a French businesswoman and her Cambodian partner were taking revenge on Mr. Savuth for a failed business they had mounted together, though he declined to say who the Frenchwoman was.

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