

PAEDOPHILES INFILTRATE AID CHARITIES

Full story: Charity's haven for famine children destroyed by paedophile scourge

Reported by: Audrey Gillan

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British paedophiles are targeting charities and aid agencies in developing countries in an attempt to gain access to vulnerable children.

The National Criminal Intelligence Service, which registers and monitors the activities of paedophiles, has warned that the scale of the problem is on a level with sex tourism. Faced with legal safeguards in the United Kingdom, the men have found that it is easy to gain access to children in developing countries.

The Guardian has discovered that a number of British and Canadian paedophiles have targeted an aid agency working with orphans of the famine in Ethiopia. They infiltrated Switzerland's biggest children's charity Terre des Hommes Lausanne (Tdh), and went to live and work in a children's village at Jari in Ethiopia's south Wollo region.

One of the men, David Christie, 57, who is British, was sacked from the charity after admitting an "improper sexual relationship" with one of the 300 or so children in his care. He has not been prosecuted and is now living in north London. Yesterday he refused to discuss the allegations.

Another five men are alleged to have been involved in abuse. A psychologist who has worked with the traumatised children, Tizita Gebreu, said she knew of at least six abusers who operated a "tight, closed system".

One of the men linked to the ring is Marc Lachance, the founder of Circus Ethiopia, the world-travelling band of acrobats and jugglers recruited from the homeless of Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa. Lachance, 40, born in Oxford but raised in Montreal, killed himself last May after boys in the circus sought political asylum while on tour in Australia last year, citing abuse.

Last month, Benjamin Foot, the Ethiopia programme director of Save the Children, wrote to all his staff after he discovered what had happened at Tdh.

"We are now faced with the possibility that there remain a number of individuals at liberty who are either known paedophiles or have been accused of child abuse ... The lesson that must be learnt from this is that paedophilia is a major but frequently hidden problem. We also know that agencies that work with children are vulnerable to being targeted by paedophiles."

A spokesperson for NCIS said that increasing numbers of paedophiles were focusing on charities or teaching work. "NCIS also knows of paedophiles who have pretended to work for charities or who have invented charities in foreign countries. These pretend charities are in effect nothing more than paedophile rings," he said. "These people take advantage of children when they are at their most vulnerable and in need of care. It allows them access to children on a level rivalling the traditional paedophile sex tourism."

Ray Wyre, a psychologist who has worked with both police and a number of high profile offenders, has discovered former clients with paedophile convictions to be working abroad with children.

"As we get better and better at control and databases, the offender goes for the weakest link which is the voluntary sector and charities, especially abroad. You have people going from charity to charity. It gives them access to children who are much more vulnerable. In these countries you could buy a child for a packet of crisps," he said.

A spokesman for the foreign office said it was aware of the reports of abuse from Ethiopia and the details had been passed to Scotland Yard but the matter pre-dated the 1997 sex offenders act which allows British courts to try UK nationals for crimes of this nature.

"This government is very concerned about this issue. We will be looking to work with foreign governments in combating this problem and offering our help to [non-governmental organisations] with concerns over their selection procedure," he said.

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Last night other charities, including Voluntary Services Overseas and Christian Aid, said they too were concerned.

Christoph Schmocker, spokesman for Tdh, said: "It's a fact that paedophiles are attracted to organisations such as ours and now we can try and find mechanisms to fight against them. But we are afraid that this could happen to us again."