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Friday the 20th of February 2009

'Orphan' babies reunited with their mothers

Written by Bill Bainbridge and Lon Nara
FRIDAY, 07 DECEMBER 2001

TWO women were reunited with their babies December 4, six months after they surrendered them to what they were told was an "organization for widows and orphans".

The infants were returned at Phnom Penh Municipal Court by staff of the Khmer American Orphans' Association (KAOA).

Phnom Penh Municipal Court Prosecutor Sok Roeun said three alleged perpetrators, Soun Sophea Rasmei, Kao Sophan and Hen Nhean, all KAOA staff, have been charged with child trafficking under Article 7.

When contacted by the Post KAOA director Sea Visoth, also Rasmei's husband, denied any involvement in facilitating adoptions to the United States and said that he was "just trying to help" the women.

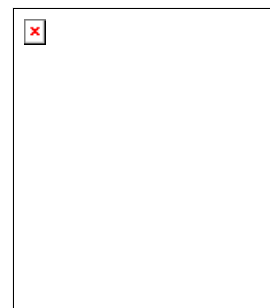
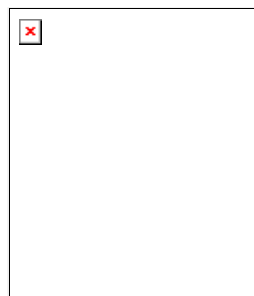
"No, I'm not involved at all. That's not true. I just take care of babies," he said.

However the US adoption agency 'A New Arrival' emails its prospective clients informing them that: "ANA works directly with Visoth ... [he] has been doing adoption work in Cambodia for years ... [and] has contracts with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, Vocational Training and Youth Rehabilitation".

The Montana-based agency's email states that most orphans are "relinquished due to extreme poverty" and informs parents that "we meticulously check our country agents". The agency charges \$16,085 to arrange adoptions from Cambodia.

The case came to the attention of human rights NGO Licadho after the September 3 raid on a Tuol Kork clinic. Following publicity from the raid the women approached Licadho in the hope that their

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Police Blotter: 19 Feb 2009
Two people died on Monday when they ran a motorbike into a tractor that was

children were among the twelve children and infants seized.

"I just started to worry when I read about the raid in the local newspapers. I suspected that my children might be among them, because it was the same clinic," said the mother of one, only six months old.

Both mothers were invited to attend a November 26 court hearing by prosecutor Sok Roeun. According to a Licadho statement, staff of KAOA offered to return the children if the mothers agreed to drop the criminal complaint they had filed with Ministry of Interior's anti-trafficking unit and the Phnom Penh Municipal Court.

The women refused and the parties were invited to return to court again December 4 by court President Sao Sopheary where Visoth volunteered to return the babies.

Both women said they were "very happy" with the outcome.

"Now I am trying to find a beautiful name for my baby," said one. She said the center had renamed their children Athith and Chan (sun and moon).

"I can't explain how happy I was when I saw my baby. Before I couldn't do anything because I missed my baby very much," said one mother.

The women, who worked as waitresses at the same restaurant, had both been deserted by their husbands while pregnant. They said they were approached in June by people claiming to represent an organization that helped widows and orphans.

At the time one woman was about to give birth and the other had a six-month-old boy. They were told the organization would look after their children and they would be able to visit them once a month.

Their children were taken for HIV testing and when the results were negative they were given \$80 as a "donation", told they could expect an extra \$30 per month and assured that their children would receive good food, education and medical care.

"It seemed like a good idea but then they wouldn't tell me where my baby was staying. When I asked to see the director they said he was too busy," the mother said.

After persistently complaining the women said they were provided with passport style photos of their children.

A spokesman from the US Embassy said he could not confirm if the passport photos had been submitted with visa applications.

Visoth disputes the women's account. "You know the birth mother gave the children to my neighbor and my neighbor tried to help those children because they were very skinny and very poor. They asked me for help," he said.

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