

US group charged with child trafficking in Haiti

Bill Van Auken
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Ten members of a Baptist Church-affiliated “rescue” group from Idaho have been detained in Haiti, accused of child trafficking for attempting to spirit 33 Haitian children out of the country without any official permission.

The group claimed to be taking the children to an orphanage in the neighboring Dominican Republic, ultimately to be adopted by evangelical Christian families in the US. The orphanage, however, exists only on paper, and many of the children said that their parents or other close relatives had survived the January 12 earthquake.

The incident is part of what amounts to a second invasion of Haiti, following the country’s occupation by thousands of US soldiers and Marines and the blockading of its coastline by US warships and Coast Guard cutters.

Before the earthquake, Haiti had one of the highest concentrations of missionaries in the world—some 1,700—many of whom were evacuated. Now, thousands more have poured back in to conduct haphazard and uncoordinated attempts to distribute aid or to carry out individual “rescue” operations.

In a country where at least 200,000 people have died, another quarter of a million are injured and up to three million are homeless, these efforts have done little to alleviate the massive suffering and are, in many cases, aimed more at promoting Christian fundamentalism and the individual religious groups.

The 10 Americans were arrested at the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic last Friday, when Haitian border agents saw dozens of children packed into their bus and found that none of them had passports or any documents authorizing their being taken out of the country.

The Americans have been held in a police headquarters pending a decision by Haitian judicial authorities on their fate. The government has indicated that it is prepared to bow to Washington’s demands that the group be

repatriated to the US to face charges, if any are ultimately brought. A decision had been expected Monday.

The children were taken to an orphanage outside of Port-au-Prince run by the charity group SOS Children after being returned from the Dominican border on Saturday. Patricia Vargas, the regional director of SOS Children, told Agence France Presse, “The majority of these children have families. Some of the older ones said their parents are alive, and some gave an address and phone numbers.”

“One (8-year-old) girl was crying, and saying, ‘I am not an orphan. I still have my parents.’ And she thought she was going on a summer camp or a boarding school or something like that,” George Willeit, a spokesman for SOS Children’s Villages in Haiti told the Associated Press.

The news agency quoted Willeit as saying that the children had arrived at the orphanage “very hungry, very thirsty,” and that an infant had to be hospitalized because of dehydration.

Haitian officials denounced the actions of the Christian group. “It is clear now that they were trying to cross the border without papers,” Prime Minister Max Bellerive told the AP. “It is clear now that some of the children have live parents,” he said. “And it is clear now that they knew what they were doing was wrong.”

The leader and spokeswoman of the group, Laura Silsby, argued that it was all an innocent mistake, claiming that she and her fellow church members believed that there would be no problem with taking a busload of Haitian children out of the country without any documents stating who they were or whether the government or even their families have given them permission to leave.

“In this chaos the government is in right now, we were just trying to do the right thing,” Silsby, told the AP.

It appears, however, that Silsby and her fellow suspects

were exploiting this “chaos” in a bid to scoop traumatized children off the streets of Port-au-Prince and jump start plans for an orphanage-adoption enterprise that had been floated just two months before the magnitude seven earthquake devastated Haiti.

Silsby, who is the CEO of a Boise, Idaho-based online shopping Web site, PersonalShopper.com, filed papers last November with the state of Idaho to establish the New Life Children’s Refuge as a nonprofit corporation.

This ambitious project, which secured the backing of a Southern Baptist church in Idaho, called for setting up an orphanage/school in the Dominican Republic beach resort of Playa Magante, which would house up to 200 children and include “seaside villas” to accommodate “adopting parents” from the US during the 60- to 90-day waiting period required under Dominican law.

The group’s mission statement makes it clear that religious conversion was also an objective, stating that it would “share God’s love with these precious children, helping them find new life in Christ.”

This is modus operandi of all the Southern Baptist and other evangelical missionary groups operating in Haiti and other impoverished countries, where aid is used as a weapon to convert those who receive it.

With the earthquake, the group announced the launching of “Haitian Orphan Rescue Mission,” and their intentions to fly to the Dominican Republic, drive a bus across the border to Port-au-Prince “gather 100 orphans from the streets and collapsed orphanages” and drive them back across the border. Without even having secured a site in the Dominican Republic, much less having built an orphanage, the group claimed it had rented a 45-room hotel, where it could house up to 150 children.

While Silsby claimed that the group understood that all of the children were either orphans or had been abandoned by their parents, CBS News found that the Americans had gone into a Port-au-Prince neighborhood distributing leaflets promising a “better life” for children and a school where they would have a swimming pool and tennis courts. Some Haitian parents said they had given their children because of the desperate conditions they confronted after the earthquake. Some of the children said that they had believed they were being taken on a holiday trip.

There is no indication that any of those involved in this operation have any expertise in caring for traumatized children, education or providing for any of their needs.

The Facebook profiles for Silsby and others in the group are revealing in terms of their political orientation.

Silsby’s includes the Facebook page of Alaska’s former right-wing Republican Governor Sarah Palin as one of her favorites, along with that of the Manhattan Initiative, which was established by right-wing evangelicals and Catholics, including convicted Watergate felon Chuck Colson, to oppose the right to abortion and gay marriage. Others list other Christian right sites, such as Focus on the Family.

The conviction of these layers is that the United States is God’s country, and that they are entitled to do as they please in countries like Haiti. Similar conceptions animate much of the US military in its occupations and wars of aggression around the globe.

Back in Idaho, the Rev. Clint Henry of the Central Valley Baptist Church, with which some of the “rescue” group’s members are affiliated, called upon his congregation to pray to God to “help them as they seek to resist the accusations of Satan.”

This association of Haiti with “Satan” is not unique to Reverend Henry. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the Christian right televangelist Pat Robertson made a rambling statement that Haiti was being punished for a deal its leaders had made with Satan to secure their independence from France at the beginning of the 19th Century. This religious interpretation placed the Christian god firmly on the side of slavery and oppression.

The operation by the Idaho Baptist group was staged in the context of an appalling crisis for the children of Haiti, who, like the rest of the population have still not received adequate food, water, medical care and other aid, fully three weeks after the disaster.

An estimated one million Haitian children have either been orphaned or lost one of their parents to the January 12 catastrophe. Large numbers have been left in the street, prey not only to Southern Baptists looking to feed the demand for adoptions, but also to professional traffickers, who have abducted children for use as slave labor, in sexual trafficking and, according to Haiti’s prime minister, to be harvested for human organs. Many are believed to have already been smuggled across the border to the Dominican Republic.



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