

Pastor Allegedly Trafficked Girls Through Christian-Operated Orphanage

Police in southern India have arrested a pastor accused of trafficking girls through a Christian-run orphanage that was taken over by authorities two years ago during an investigation into the unregistered children's home.

Police in southern Tamil Nadu state said they arrested Pastor Gideon Jacob on Saturday after he arrived from Germany and he has been charged under trafficking and juvenile justice laws.

Denying the allegations, Jacob's lawyer told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that his client had voluntarily appeared before the police and was cooperating with the investigation.

The Moses Ministries home in Tiruchy, run by Germany-based Christian Initiative for India that was founded by Jacob in 1989, housed 89 children, all said to have been rescued from female infanticide from Usilampatti in neighboring Madurai.

However, the home had no proper records of the children, all of whom are now aged 18 years and above.

In December 2015, the home was taken over by the social welfare department after a court directive.

A wave of claims by people saying they were the children's parents prompted a local court to rule that all the children should undergo DNA testing to establish their real families.

In 2016, DNA results showed at least 32 matches. None of the girls, however, have yet been reunited with their families.

"We have been counselling the girls, who have known no other

life since they were babies,” said Tiruchy district head Kuppanna Gounder Rajamani.

“We have also identified the parents willing to take back their daughters and, following Saturday’s arrest, things will move faster and we are hoping to reunite the girls soon.”

More than 40 percent of human trafficking cases in India in 2015 involved children being bought, sold and exploited as modern-day slaves, according to government crime data.

There has been a recent spate of reports of the trafficking of infants and children for adoption and raising funds through charity-run child homes and private hospitals.

In Tamil Nadu, state authorities closed 500 homes between 2011 and 2016, citing mismanagement, a lack of registration and misconduct.

Rights groups have long complained that children’s homes in India are poorly regulated, not inspected often enough, and that many privately-run institutions are able to operate without a license leaving thousands of children open to abuse.

“The arrest gives us hope that there will be justice,” said A. Narayanan, the director of advocacy group Change India, who outlined the scope of the problem in a petition filed in Chennai’s High Court.

“The real worry is when and how these girls will be rehabilitated. Right now, it seems like a life sentence, where they are resigned to live in an institutional home.” {eo}

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