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SWIFT COVICTION FOR U.S. CITIZEN WHO VIOLENTLY ABUSED CHILDREN IN CAMBODIA

NGO investigation leads to perpetrator arrest; organization with 10 years experience fighting sex trafficking says convictions like this “change the fear equation”

May 29 – LOS ANGELES – The trial of a U.S. citizen accused of violently sexually abusing seven minor victims in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, ended today with a conviction on all seven counts of PROTECT Act violations. Deliberations lasted only an hour before the jury delivered a guilty verdict against Michael Joseph Pepe, an American who was working part-time as a professor at a Cambodian university when he was arrested by Cambodian authorities in June 2006 for sexual violence against multiple child victims.

During the June 2006 search of his home that led to his arrest, police found three minor female victims, aged 9, 10 and 11, as well as hundreds of pornographic images, including those of children engaging in sex acts, various drugs, children’s clothes, and rope and cloth strips, which victims say Pepe used to bind and gag them while he assaulted them.

Subsequent investigation in Cambodia located four additional minor victims, ranging from 10 to 14 years in age. Following his arrest by Cambodian authorities, Pepe was deported to the U.S. in February 2007, where he was charged under the PROTECT Act with engaging in illicit sexual conduct in a foreign place. Pepe was ordered held without bond until his arraignment, which was May 8 in the U.S. District Court, Central District of California.

“What we have learned in our casework is that the perpetrators who commit crimes like this are not brave people: They commit these crimes in places like Cambodia because they believe they won’t get caught,” explains Sharon Cohn Wu, human rights lawyer and senior vice president of justice operations for International Justice Mission, an NGO involved in Pepe’s arrest. “Now, international collaboration between law enforcement and NGOs like International Justice Mission is stopping people like Michael Pepe and sending a strong message to perpetrators of these crimes: Abuse children, and you will go to jail.”

According to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Pepe is the fourth individual to be prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Central District of California on child sex tourism charges under the PROTECT Act, which allows for the prosecution of any U.S. citizen or permanent resident alien “who travels in foreign commerce and engages in any illicit sexual conduct with another person.”

Pepe’s arrest was achieved through cooperation between an international NGO and U.S. and Cambodian authorities. Investigations into Pepe’s conduct began when a minor victim receiving assistance from human rights organization International Justice Mission reported to staff that she and several other young girls had been abused by Pepe. IJM conducts investigations and provides legal services for victims of trafficking and other forms of violent abuse in order to secure victim relief and aftercare, perpetrator accountability and structural change.

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IJM conducted an investigation of the allegations, sharing information with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Cambodia National Police. With information furnished by IJM, the Phnom Penh Municipal courts issued search and arrest warrants in the case, leading to Pepe's eventual deportation to the U.S. for trial.

Cambodian officers also arrested and charged four other suspects for human trafficking in the case, including Pepe's girlfriend, Choeung Thy Sang, Pepe's cook, and two other women, both of whom were accused of having sold their daughters to Pepe for sex. Sang has since been convicted and sentenced to 27 years in prison for pimping and human trafficking for charges stemming from receiving monetary compensation in return for delivering underage girls to Pepe for sex.

Case Timeline: Michael Joseph Pepe

May 2006: Victim reports Pepe's abuse to International Justice Mission staff in Cambodia.

May 2006: International Justice Mission investigative staff conduct surveillance of Pepe's Phnom Penh home, providing information to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Cambodian authorities.

June 2006: Phnom Penh Municipal courts issue search and arrest warrants for Pepe.

June 2006: During search of Pepe's home, Cambodian police discover three minor female victims (ages 10 and 11)
Search also reveals hundreds of pornographic images, including those of children engaging in sex acts, various drugs, children's clothes, rope and cloth strips, which victims say Pepe used to bind and gag them while he assaulted them.

June 2006: Pepe is arrested by Cambodian law enforcement.

February 2007: Pepe is escorted to the U.S. by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials.

February 2007: Pepe is charged under the PROTECT Act with engaging in illicit sexual conduct in a foreign place.

May 8, 2008: Pepe's trial begins in the U.S. District Court, Central District of California.

May 29, 2008: Pepe is convicted on all seven counts of violations of the PROTECT Act