

Rotarians against Child Slavery

IA Newsletter for the proposed Rotarian Action Group – See website www.racsrag.org

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Issue No 19

One of the strongest chains that hold slaves in bondage is lack of knowledge (Kevin Bales – “Ending Slavery”)



“Challenges are insurmountable only until the moment that they are surmounted” (Nicholas Kristof & Sheryl Wudunn - “Half the Sky”)



It is always darkest before the dawn

The RI Board has just recognized two RAGs ie the Food Plant Solutions and Literacy Groups, but the Board did not *“agree to recognize the proposed RAG against Child Slavery because it is primarily an advocacy group”*.

Readers will make up their own minds about the one sentence minute. To me, however, it appears to trivialize our Action Group’s raison d’etre. At the same time, I am encouraged by the positive responses received from Action Group

Project involvement is the key

The Board’s rejection of our Action Group was based on the belief that we were primarily an advocacy group. Yet Newsletter 17 (made available to the Board before the relevant meeting) provided a list of anti-slavery projects completed in 2010, the first full year of the Group’s existence. This prompted one member to write *“I really don’t understand why our projects weren’t considered projects”*

Irrespective of what has happened, we now need to prove to the RI Board that we are also an action group. The best way to

members, following the RI Board’s negative decision. For example, Rtn Oge Ogedegbe from the RC of New Benim, Nigeria writes *“The standing down of the recognition of our Action Group for me is only a temporary set back. It may even be the tonic that would spur members to intensify efforts at strengthening the work of the group”*.

Rtn Carol Metzker from the RC of West Chester Downtown, USA reframes negative thoughts as an opportunity for change.

achieve that aim is to increase our participation in anti-slavery projects.

To that end, certain action group members are now exploring the possibilities of projects for slave-rehab centres in Haiti, Ghana, the United States and elsewhere.

Included in Annex B are project opportunities available to Clubs to work with those anti-slavery organizations and activists whose aim is to protect vulnerable children and to make life difficult for those who wish to enslave them.

How about persuading your clubs to take up one

She writes *“ In 10 years, we will have made a difference. Our Group will have been a catalyst in bringing down child slavery and helping its rescued victims”*

With members like that how can the Action Group possibly fail to fulfill its ambitions.

Further comments from members are included later. In the meantime please note that the full text of the Board’s minute is included as Annex A to this Newsletter.

of these project options so that when the opportunity presents itself, we inform the RI Board that they no longer have a reason to withhold their approval ?

As a starter, my club ie the Rotary Club of Norwich St Edmund is seeking a joint partner or partners for the Solar Lamp project (see Annex B) at Punarnawa Ashram, Bihar, which is estimated to cost \$7,500. We currently have funds of \$2,500 to apply to this scheme. Any takers to form a partnership with Norwich St Edmund to achieve this project ?

Supporting children's rights



The RI Board's negative decision is baffling because it has rejected an Action Group which is trying, amongst other things, to encourage Rotarians to fulfill their commitment under the RI Code of Policies in relation to the Rights of Children. It is worth reiterating, the wording of the Code:

“Rotary International recognizing that children because of their vulnerability, need special care and attention, endorses and supports the rights of children to food, shelter, healthcare, education and freedom from abuse, violence and slavery. Rotary Clubs around the world are committed to protecting these rights for all children, regardless of race, creed or nationality”

How do Rotary Clubs

protect children from abuse, violence and slavery if they are unaware that children are being exploited in the first place? In the absence of an Action Group like ours, who will expose examples of child exploitation?, who will encourage Rotary action on these issues? Who will remind Rotarians how best to take action? eg construction of schools to take vulnerable children off the streets and out of the reach of the traffickers.

Children are the easiest targets for exploitation and this was recognized by former RI President DK Lee, who in explaining his theme of “Make Dreams Real”, stated that Rotarians were “in a position to take these children out of their living nightmares into a world where there is hope and expectation”.

According to the International Labour Organisation there are 8.4 million children worldwide engaged in what it calls “the worst forms of labour”.

Most of these were particularly vulnerable to trafficking and enslavement because they were invisible when they were procured. A lack of adequate birth registry services in many underdeveloped countries means large numbers of unregistered children. They have little access to schools, social services and health care and so are easy prey for traffickers and slave holders and ideal for the deadly jobs which are inevitably allocated to them. A couple of examples will illustrate some of the dangers which slave children face.



Children working on Lake Volta, Ghana

On Lake Volta in Ghana, boys as young as six are forced to dive to disentangle nets caught on tree stumps below this man made lake. The fishermen tie weights to the children to help them descend more quickly. When the water is too cold or the children get caught in the nets below it is not uncommon to find bodies washed up on the shore. In the absence of a Rotarian Action Group, who is going to encourage clubs to protect these children from “abuse, violence and slavery”, who is going to remind Rotarians of their ethical responsibilities under the Code of Policies? where do clubs turn to for information and advice if they wish to help?



Children working in Fireworks Factories

Little children have nimble fingers so are more than useful in factories which make carpets or fireworks. In his book "Disposable People", Professor Kevin Bales reported that some 45,000 bonded children (aged between 4 yrs to 15 yrs) work in factories around the City of Sivakasi in the State of Tamil Nadu, India, making fireworks and matches. A study by UNICEF surveying thirty three buses, found 150 to 200 children jammed into a single bus each day carrying the children between 3 am and 5 am into the factories and not returning to their village homes until after 7.00 pm. In the run up to the big Diwali holiday, the factories extend their hours and are in production seven days a week.

According to Kevin Bales, *"the children roll and pack the fireworks in dark and dingy sheds. The gunpowder mixture is corrosive and over time it eats away the skin on a child's finger. When this happens, blisters form and the child can't work, as the chemicals burn quickly into the exposed flesh. To wait for the blisters to heal takes five to six days. Instead a hot coal or a lit cigarette normally is applied to the blister, bursting it and cauterizing the wound. In time the children's fingertips become a mass of scar tissue. The powdered potassium chlorate, phosphorus and zinc oxides also fill their lungs and leads to breathing problems and blood poisoning"* . I wonder who is looking out for the interests of these unfortunates ? Are there any Rotarians fulfilling their commitment to protect these children from "abuse, violence and slavery" ?

What constitutes "slavery" ?

There is often confusion between the terms "child slavery" and "child exploitation" or "child labour". It is a fact of life that there are millions of children all over the world who are working in places like food stalls, hotels and restaurants or as domestic servants because they may be the only bread winner in the family. But for these unfortunates at least they have a choice, albeit a very difficult one, to work or not to work, to leave or not to leave. A child who is a slave has no choice. A slave is someone who is unpaid, unable to leave and is controlled by violence or the threat of violence. For these children, their free will is taken away. Their labour, their lives and their minds are consumed by someone else's greed. It is this group which is the focus of attention of the proposed Rotarian Action Group against Child Slavery. Attempting to tackle the broader issue of "child labour" would be a bridge too far, even for Rotarians. For those of you who are acquainted with an existing or future RI Director, please explain that the Action Group is only focused on the narrow definition of "slaves" as defined above.

Reactions from members

Since my last Newsletter, I have been receiving the comments of members who like me are still trying to make sense of the RI Board's decision to reject our application for RAG status. Helen Goransson from the RC of South Berwick-Eliot, USA is one of a number of Rotarians who is bemused by the decision. She writes:

"So sorry to hear about the denial of that request. It's a shame that Rotary did not consider the actions of the group worthy of the designation. I still recall the fine work being done at the ashram we visited in India and the lives of those young people that were saved through the efforts at the ashram. That was certainly "action" – going out and saving children, plucking them from their enslavers and rehabilitating them so they can go out and save future victims. To me, that was more "active" than the participation of Rotarians in the NID during our visit. I tend to be cynical about these things, but it seems to me that attacking this practice actually attacks the bottom line of influential Rotarians who profit from child slavery and who therefore would find it insulting to them for Rotary to take a stand on this" .

Alternative suggestions as to why we failed to achieve approved status were also offered by members, eg *"there are politics here. RI do not want bad press from affected governments"* (Malcolm Goodson, RC of Norwich St Edmund, England) : *"In the case of RI, are directors afraid we are getting too close to political meddling", giving Rotary a black eye or endangering other projects/relationships"* (Carol Metzker, RC of West Chester Downtown, Pennsylvania, USA)*"the RI Board does not like to be faced with contentious issues"*, (Rosemary Jones, RC of Redhill, Reigate & Horley, England) *"the suggestion that Rotarians against Slavery, in their efforts to help halt the practice of child slavery, could in fact be dabbling in issues of culture"* (Harry Payne, RC of Wickford, England). Whilst it is important that we consider these possibilities and continue to learn which issues have merit, we must consider how to continue and expand our work to help victims who need our advocacy and projects.

As to which course to follow, some members suggested going down the Fellowship or People Action Group route, but the majority proposed a resubmission for RAG status. Julie Johansen of the RC of Whatmore County North, Washington, USA confesses *"I like the idea of trying again for RAG status in a year. In the meantime, send a copy of "Half the Sky" to every RI Board director. They may need more information" ?* Ogie Ogedegbe from the RC of New Benin, Nigeria writes: *"In my candid view, taking the group out of the Rotary fold would mean a defeat for the original motive of starting the group. The thing to do, therefore, is to take the level of the Group so high that the council will find the advocacy slant is even a plus to many accolades of RI'*

Meddling in Politics ?

Two years ago a prominent Indian Rotarian friend advised me that trying to promote anti-slavery work in India would be a difficult exercise because the subject was a highly political one. This viewpoint is contrary to my own experience of working, these last 10 years, on this issue with different Rotary Clubs in Delhi and latterly with Rotarians in Mumbai and Pratapgarh where I met scores of Indian Rotarians who would like to see the end of true slavery in their country. This would explain why we have an increasing number of Action Group members from the Sub Continent who believe that helping to protect basic human rights is a humanitarian and not a political act.

In any case the monetary value of slavery relative to the world economy is very small and most slave based revenues flow to support not national economies or transnational industries, but individuals, greedy people and small scale criminal networks. In such circumstances it is difficult to understand why anybody would consider that Rotarians, who act to help with the rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration of child slaves, are meddling with politics.

Dabbling in issues of culture ?

Unfortunately through ignorance there are several traditions or customs which have been in existence for years which do offend against the Articles of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These include customs such as female circumcision, forced marriages, bride burning, female infanticide, etc.

Whilst these inhuman customs are not part of the remit of the proposed Action Group against Child Slavery, there are other customs which do come under the remit of the Action Group. Examples include the use of child soldiers, the donation of young girls (*the trokosis*) by their families in Ghana to local fetish priests as an atonement for alleged offences or the continuation in South India of the religious custom known as *"devadasi"*, when young girls (the joginis) are forced into prostitution. The custom requires parents to marry a daughter to a deity or a temple. The marriage usually occurs before the girl reaches puberty and requires the girl to become a prostitute for upper caste community members. The practice was officially outlawed in 1986 but continues unabated.

In such circumstances should we defer to these local or regional customs or should we try to change the culture through education or by assisting grass roots movements ? In practice as Rotarians we have no choice but to honour our obligations under the RI's Manual of Procedures which tells us that we should

- Defend the rule of law and order to preserve liberty of the individual so that all may enjoy freedom of thought, speech and assembly; freedom from all persecutions and aggression and freedom from want and fear.
- Uphold the principles of justice for humankind, realizing that these are fundamental and must be worldwide

Conclusions

The recent decision of the RI Board to reject our FAG status has been a great disappointment but it is only a temporary setback and we should stay positive. The majority of the members who have provided comments believe that we should resubmit our application for recognition **as a Rotarian Action Group** to the Board as soon as possible. Success in this objective will only be achieved if clubs participate in anti-slavery projects on an increasing scale. Failure to do so will justify the Board's decision that the proposed Action Group is primarily concerned with advocacy and not action.

The existence of an active Rotarian Action Group against Child Slavery is essential because it provides a forum within Rotary circles for raising awareness of the existence of child slavery, for openly condemning this evil practice, for taking action to free children from the bonds of slavery, for raising funds to support the work of anti-slavery organizations and for reminding us of our ethical obligations to protect the weak, the vulnerable and the abused children of the world.

These ethical responsibilities also apply to the RI Board and its Directors and are quite specific. We are obliged to encourage and foster high ethical standards in business and the professions under the Object of Rotary; we are obliged to adhere to the tenets of the 4-Way Test; we are obliged to uphold RI's Code of Policies in relation to the Rights of Children and we are obliged to follow the RI's Manual of Procedures which commits us to defend the rule of law and the principles of justice.

If one takes the view that the Board, its Directors and individual Rotarians have a constitutional duty and moral responsibility to uphold, maintain and promote its embedded Rotary codes and values, then any failure on its, or its Members part to do so can only lead to a progressive loss of credibility and a devaluation of Rotary's global standing as an advocate of human rights. That being so, it could be argued that progression of an anti-child slavery campaign, fully endorsed and supported by the RI Board is a fundamental humanitarian imperative by which it, and all its Members should and will be judged..

PLEASE ENCOURAGE FELLOW ROTARIANS TO VISIT OUR WEBSITE AND SIGN ON AS A MEMBER. THE WEBSITE IS: www.racsrag.org.

Web Master: Stephen Sypula, RC of Stevenage Grange, England

Mark Little, RC of Norwich St Edmund
District 1080, England
9th March 2011

ANNEX A

DECISION: The Board

1. agrees to recognize the Food Plant Solutions Rotarian Action Group, and requests the general secretary to work with the group to modify its bylaws in order to comply with the recent changes to policy governing Rotarian Action Groups;
2. looks with favor on the recognition of a Literacy Rotarian Action Group, and requests the proposers of the two literacy groups in formation to develop a unified statement of purpose, list of proposed officers, and bylaws for one new Literacy Rotarian Action Group based on the prior submissions of both groups;
3. authorizes the chair of the Rotarian Action Groups Committee to review these materials and recognize the group on behalf of the Board after the items in point 2 above have been fulfilled;
4. does not agree to recognize the Rotarian Action Group Against Child Slavery because it is primarily an advocacy group.

ANNEX B**PROJECT OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEMBERS****Bal Vikas Ashram (BVA), near Allahabad, India**

BVA is a Child Slave Rehabilitation Centre for boys aged between 8-14 years who have been rescued from slavery in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar State in India. The Centre has been in existence for 10 years and is run by the Allahabad Diocesan Development & Welfare Society. It is supported by an anti-slavery organization called Free the Slaves. A brief account of a Rotary visit by various members of the Action Group to this Ashram was included in Newsletter 16 dated 1st December.

The Ashram has three major objectives, ie the rescue, rehabilitation and the reintegration of children who have been subjected to slavery. After rehabilitation and reintegration the boys gradually become leaders in their home villages. At home, they are often the only people with the confidence and knowledge to stand up to the local landowners and money lenders who prey on their families. The result is that they become change agents who help slaveproof their villages

On the next page is a list of the items which the Ashram would like to purchase.

BVA would like to purchase

<u>Vocational Training purposes</u>	Rs	\$
a) Two computers & printers for the children	80,000	1,780
b) Candle making equipment	15,000	330
c) Various tools for workshops	10,000	220
 <u>Recording and photographing victims' Statements and rescue operations.</u>		
a) One camera for each of the 12 districts 12 @ Rs 9,000 each	108,000	2,400
b) Two video recorders @ Rs 22,500 each	45,000	1,000

Punarnawa Ashram, Purnea, Bihar, India

Punarnawa Ashram is a Restoration and Rehabilitation Shelter for Trafficked young girls, near Purnea, Bihar. A brief account of this Ashram and my visit was included in Newsletter No 16, dated 1st December 2010.

The Ashram would like to purchase

<u>Security purposes</u>	Rs	\$
12 solar lamps (incl panels, lamp posts & installation costs) 12 @ Rs 28,000 each	336,000	7,460
 <u>Water heating purposes</u>		
2 solar panels to be place on roof of 2 dormitory buildings to provide warm water & for clothes washing (estimate incls panels & installation costs Rs 30,500 (\$675) @ 2	61,000	1,350
 <u>Transport</u>		
Motor scooter	45,000	1,000
Motor vehicle – taking residents into town for medical Needs, collecting bulk groceries, meetings with Lawyers & officials etc	702,400	15,600

(As at 9th March 2011)