



## First evaluation Ring the Alarm

*An international petition against the unbanning of child-sex advocacy group Martijn*

### 1. Introduction to the project

Ring the Alarm is an international collaboration between Action Pour Les Enfants (APLE) (Cambodia) and Operation Bobbi Bear (OBB) (South Africa). The project was started in May 2013 and was initiated as a result of the unbanning of Dutch child-sex advocacy group *Martijn* in April 2013. The activities of *Martijn* are aimed at normalizing and glorifying sexual relationships between adults and children. Through their website (currently offline), media performances, video-blogs, interviews etc., *Martijn* lobbies for lowering age of consent in The Netherlands to 12 years (and preferably abolishing age of consent altogether) and the legalization of child-pornography. *Martijn* also ridicules convictions for sexual crimes against children. The website of *Martijn* (before it went offline) contained graphic pictures of barely dressed children, combined with explicit erotic stories on sexual contact between adults and children. Many of the (former) (board) members of *Martijn* have in the (recent) past been convicted for sexual crimes against children. Both the court of first instance and the appeal court determined that *Martijn's* activities violate children in their physical and sexual integrity.

APLE and OBB combat child sexual abuse (CSA) in their respective countries. APLE is specialized in the fight against CSA in Cambodia with a focus on cases perpetrated by child-sex tourists and OBB is specialized on dealing with issues on the intersection of CSA and (subsequent) HIV-infections. Both organizations have strong connections with The Netherlands and followed the case against and the public debate on *Martijn* from the beginning. When the initial ban on *Martijn*, imposed in June 2012, was reversed, APLE and OBB decided to take joint action. APLE and OBB recognize that *Martijn* works to create a climate of acceptance and normalization of sexual relations between adults and children. *Martijn's* members openly try to convince people that there is nothing wrong with sexual contact between adults and children of any age. For those who experience sexual feelings towards children, these arguments are a powerful rationalization which could convince them that these feelings are normal and acceptable. From a children's rights and child-protection point of view, these activities are unacceptable. Through Ring the Alarm, APLE and OBB together with other children's (rights) organizations from around the world, want to be a loud voice for the safety and protection children against the harmful consequences of legalized child-sex advocacy by organizations like *Martijn*. Ring the Alarm calls on the Dutch Minister and State Secretary of Safety and Justice to enact legislation that can ban any child-sex advocacy group and a re-banning of *Martijn* specifically. Ring the Alarm looks to the International Children's Rights Charter and the Convention of Lanzarote as a basis for such legislation.

## 2. Start and execution of the project

A task-team and technical support team, consisting of staff-members and volunteers from APLE and OBB, were formed to get the project up and running. All available information on *Martijn*, such as the verdicts and summaries of the courts, Dutch and international news-reports on *Martijn* and media-outings from *Martijn* itself, were studied intensively and the response from Dutch and international public and politicians were analyzed. After processing this information, the content of the petition and the plea to the Dutch Ministry of Safety and Justice was formulated. The content of the petition was formulated to call on a *legal* solution to prevent any harmful consequences of legalized child-sex advocacy in The Netherlands.

A website was developed to present the petition to the public and to collect signatures. Ring the Alarm aimed to get support first of all from children's (rights) organizations from all over the world, specifically those that experience the consequences of CSA. The petition was also open for any other organization and individual that wanted to support the call of APLE and OBB. The task-team invested much time in pro-actively identifying and approaching potential organizational signatories.

Throughout this process, successes as well as shortcomings and pitfalls in this project were identified. Below, these successes and shortcomings/pitfalls are described.

### Successes

#### 1) 200 Organizational signatories

At the start of Ring the Alarm, the task-team aimed for an amount of 50 organizational signatories within a period of about 3 months. Eventually, signatures and support from 200 children's (rights) organizations were collected.

#### 2) International collaboration APLE and OBB

Although APLE and OBB both come from different continents, had not worked together in any way prior to the petition, nor had there been any personal meeting between staff-members or directors, the collaboration has been effective, pleasant and successful. The international character of our collaboration has enabled us to create a broad perspective on the issue and to involve organizations and people from all over the world.

#### 3) Involvement of politicians

Ring the Alarm has been able to create direct contact and the committed and active involvement of national Dutch politicians from the Christian Democratic Alliance and the Christian Union and South African politicians from the African Christian Democratic Party. The involvement of these politicians has greatly contributed to the credibility of Ring the Alarm.

#### 4) Platform for petition

Through the website, social media pages, reports in newspapers and radio-shows in different countries, a 10-minute news-report on Dutch national television, a press-conference and other (political) events in South Africa, Ring the Alarm has reached well over 1.1 million people.

#### 5) Involvement of sponsors/supporters

Ring the Alarm has been able to realise the commitment of several professionals and companies to support the project in terms of human resources and knowledge, materials and logistical costs.

### Shortcomings/pitfalls

#### 1) Complex message and sensitive topic

The public/social, political and legal debate on the (un)banning of *Martijn* is not simple or necessarily straightforward. Apart from the moral and emotional implications of (legalized) child-sex advocacy, important values and rights like the protection of the physical and sexual integrity of children and the freedom of speech and assembly need to be considered. Ring the Alarm never aimed to present a simplified view on the matter. The task-team has not been able to summarize the message of Ring the Alarm in 3 or 4 sentences that could be sent out to the public and organizations. This made it more difficult to generate quick support and signatories for Ring the Alarm. The issue of *Martijn* is also considered a sensitive (political/legal) topic. It is likely that this has made it extremely challenging for APLE and OBB to involve first of all Dutch children's (rights) organizations and also bigger international organizations (especially those that are also active on a more political level).

#### 2) Failure to generate individual signatures on a large scale

The task-team agreed that a minimum of 20.000 signatures from individuals from all over the world was a realistic goal. This turned out to be a huge challenge. Individuals, as compared to children's (rights) organizations, may have less interest in the topic and less insight in the implications of the legalization of child-sex advocacy groups. More individual signatures might have been secured if APLE and OBB and other organizations that signed and supported the petition had more resources available to go out to present the issue/petition and collect signatures.

#### 3) Confirmation of signatures

To prevent any fake or automatically generated signatures, every signatory was sent a confirmation link over email. Because a significant number of (individual) signatures were never confirmed in this way, these signatures could not be considered in the results of the petition. It has cost the task-team much time and efforts to make sure initial signatures would get confirmed.

#### 6) Education/informing of the public

Through Ring the Alarm and the activities organized related to the hand-over of the petition, APLE and OBB have been able to educate/inform the public in The Netherlands and in other countries about the issue of *Martijn* and the implications of legalized child-sex advocacy.

#### 4) Minimal resources

Ring the Alarm cost much more time and efforts than was expected by APLE and OBB prior to the start of the petition and there was a no budget for the project. The other activities in both organizations continued in the same pace and volume as prior to the petition. Members of the task-team and also the support-team had to prioritize their activities and invest most of their time in identifying and contacting new signatories and ensuring correct administration and communication with them. Regular updating of the social media pages and website has therefore lacked.

#### 5) Tone of the public debate

Public protests against (the unbanning of) *Martijn* have often been emotional and aggressive. With Ring the Alarm, we aimed to send out a less emotionally driven response that offers a perspective on legal and humane solutions to the issue. Any aggressive outings or comments on our website and social media page were systematically censored and signatories were taken of the list if we found they were calling on such aggression.

### 3. Handover of the petition

Jackie Branfield (D-OBB) and Seila Samleang (D-APLE) were in the Netherlands from the 11<sup>th</sup> of November until the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2013, to hand-over the petition and to attend related (and other) meetings and events. During their stay in The Netherlands, they were assisted by Dennis & Geartsje. A short description of the activities for Ring the Alarm during this week:

#### 13 November

In the evening, a symposium was organized in Utrecht where Jackie, Seila and Hanneke Snetselaar (who works in child-protection in The Netherlands) were the three key-note speakers. It was attended by about 120 people. The main theme of the evening was a comparison between South Africa, Cambodia and The Netherlands in terms of how each respective country encounters and deals with CSA. Jackie and Seila also introduced the petition. This was positively received by the audience.

#### 14 November

In the morning, the TV-crew from EenVandaag interviewed Jackie and Seila for the news-report about Ring the Alarm. This was aired on Saturday the 16<sup>th</sup> of November. In the afternoon and evening, Jackie, Seila and Geartsje met with managers at ECPAT NL and did a talk for their youth group. During the meeting with the managers, recent organizational successes and future ambitions of APLE, OBB and ECPAT were discussed. The talk for the ECPAT Youth Group was about the work of OBB and APLE and the petition was discussed extensively.

#### 19 November

This day was spent in Dutch parliament. In the afternoon, the first meeting was with the chair and members of the parliamentary Committee of Foreign Affairs to formally hand over the petition. This meeting was also attended by Pieter Omtzigt, a member of parliament for the Christian Democratic Appeal, who the task-team collaborated with to organize all activities in parliament. Ring the Alarm was represented by Jackie and Seila (spokespeople), Geartsje (member of the task-team), Dennis and Pieter (part of the technical support team of Ring the Alarm) and several Dutch OBB-volunteers. The supporters held up a 5 meter long banner that showed the logo's of all the organizational signatories during the entire meeting. The meeting with the committee itself went very well. The chair and members took their time to speak with Jackie and Seila about Ring the Alarm and *Martijn*. The chair offered apologies for the lack of attendance of parliamentarians that represented the Safety and Justice department. Seila and Jackie presented the petition to the chair of the committee and made a brief speech. The chair and the attending members of the committee expressed respect and gratitude for the efforts of all organizations involved with Ring the Alarm for their efforts to protect children. On the topic of the (un)banning of *Martijn* specifically, the chair remained neutral in her expressions.

In the evening, a so-called special meeting was organized by Pieter Omtzigt (CDA) and Gert-Jan Segers of the Christian Union. Both of them are working together (with parliamentarians from other political parties as well) to realize legislation that can ban organizations like *Martijn*. The meeting was attended by about 25 people and no press. The meeting was streamed online. The meeting started with Jackie and Seila reading their joint statement (see attachment). After that, first Omtzigt and Segers responded and discussions took off to which every attendant could contribute. Omtzigt and Segers gave more insight into the political views (of them and others) on *Martijn* and the difficulties they are facing in realising legislation to ban *Martijn*. Part of this is that the Supreme Court still needs to rule in the case against *Martijn*. They stipulated the aggressive tone and non-realistic solutions of other public protests against *Martijn*. Segers and Omtzigt

therefore very much welcome Ring the Alarm and called it 'the first voice of reason' on behalf of the children that can benefit their political efforts in this case. When asked about the input and support from Dutch Children's Rights organizations for their efforts to get *Martijn* banned, they stated that such input and support is virtually non-existent. When asked by some of the attendants what it is that they can do to help, Omtzigt suggested to start a NGO, completely independent from the government (in terms of funding), which can engage in (political) lobby to protect children from abuse.

Also, Omtzigt and Segers elaborated on what the Dutch government is doing to prevent CSA abroad committed by Dutch nationalities and by foreign nationalities in The Netherlands, and the difficulties in these efforts. Some of these difficulties include the lack of political support to have the (travelling) freedoms of convicted child-sex offenders limited and/or monitored and the lack of insight in the security administration systems of other countries and exchange of information on (travelling) child-sex offenders between countries. These are issues that require their ongoing attention and efforts, in order to realise more safety for children against child-sex offenders in The Netherlands and abroad. Omtzigt and Segers have therefore requested APLE and OBB to stay in direct contact with them about specific cases, developments and statistics.

In addition to the activities in The Hague on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, on the same day a press-conference was organized in Durban (South Africa) by OBB and the national African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) about Ring the Alarm and protection of children from sexual predators. A panel of representatives from OBB and ACDP addressed and engaged questions from the media, about the petition, what it means for South Africa and other developing countries, and why it is important. Other aspects of child-abuse and the work of OBB and ACDP were also discussed. It was therefore also great from an awareness perspective. Furthermore, Ring the Alarm was discussed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2013 at the 16 Days of Activism event in Chatsworth, which opened up discussions about protecting children from predators online on a (inter)national level. Ring the Alarm was also presented and discussed at ACDP's National General Conference.

#### 4. Conclusions

- Ring the Alarm is regarded by OBB and APLE as a success for various reasons. By calling for legal solutions to the issue, Ring the Alarm seems to have filled a gap that was left by the more politically influential children's rights organizations through their reluctance to speak out against (the unbanning of) *Martijn* and the more aggressively loaded organized public protest. The fact that this call for legislation against child-sex advocacy in The Netherlands comes from organizations in other countries, evoked various reactions in different people. This varied from 'arrogant' to 'refreshing'. Most of the people in The Netherlands we have spoken to, have welcomed the initiative though. Some of the people supporting Ring the Alarm that joined us to The Hague, have expressed their eagerness to become more actively involved, should OBB and APLE decide to continue with Ring the Alarm.

- Dutch politicians working towards similar or the same legislation that Ring the Alarm calls for, welcome the petition greatly and expressed their wish to stay in touch and identify opportunities to work together in the future (e.g. exchange of information).

- The directors of OBB and APLE have expressed the wish to further strengthen the relationship and collaboration between the 2 organizations. This includes the (potential) next steps for Ring the Alarm but also in terms of possible knowledge-exchange and training.

- The Ring the Alarm task-team, the directors of OBB and APLE and other people need to engage in discussions/meetings about further course of action.

For more info, please go to:

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