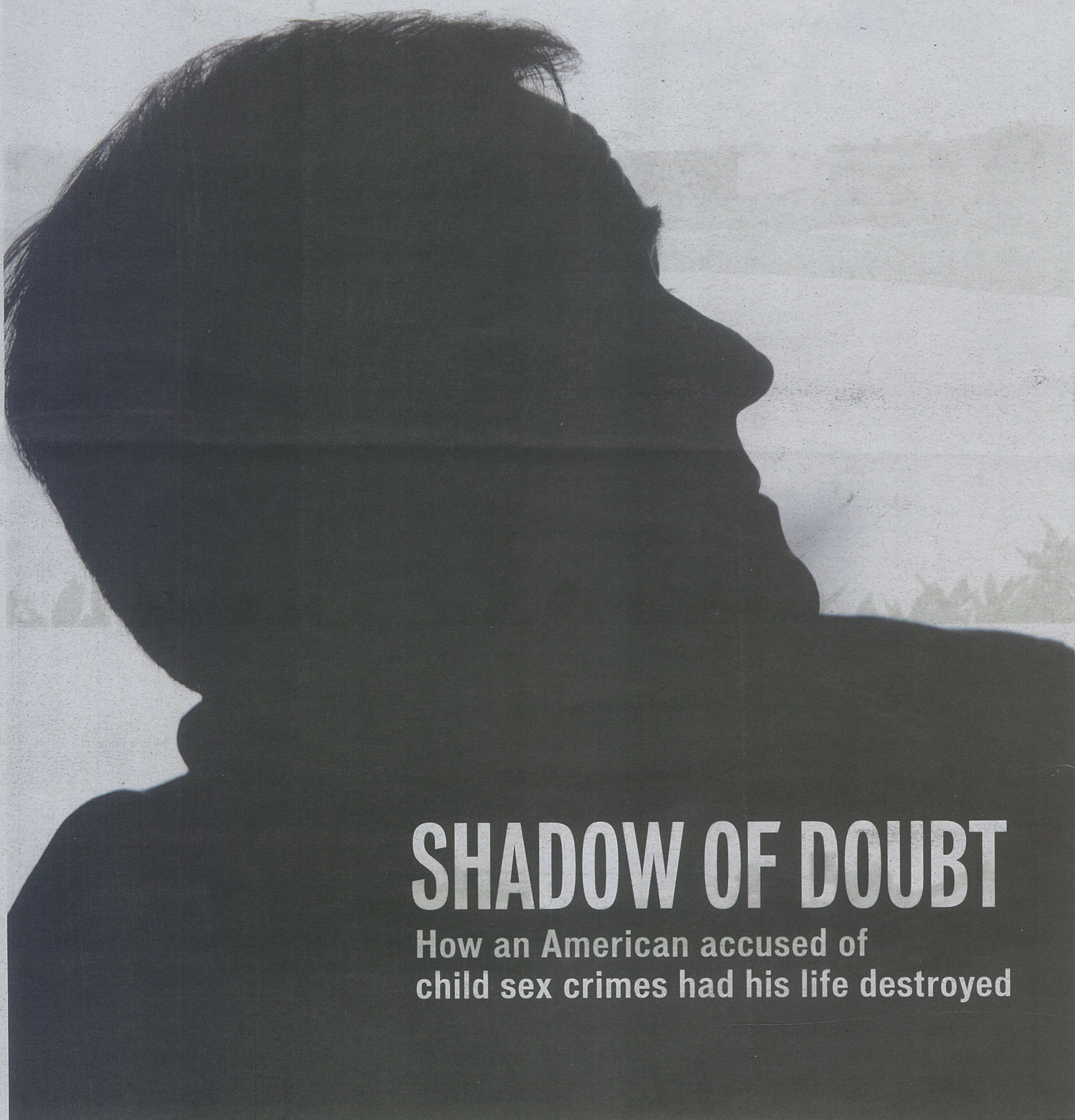


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SHADOW OF DOUBT

How an American accused of
child sex crimes had his life destroyed

Child sex case dropped, but a life still left in ruins

Christopher Lee Hobbs believes he was the victim of a set-up and poor police work when he was accused of abusing two boys in Pattaya

By Chaiyot Yongcharoenchai

On June 8 last year, the life that American engineer Christopher Lee Hobbs had been building for himself and his family came tumbling down. The 56-year-old was arrested in Pattaya on six counts of molesting two underage boys — a Thai and a Cambodian — and faced the prospect of 42 years in prison.

He was paraded before local and national media and police and his NGO accusers were lauded for catching a child abuser.

But more than one year later police and the Pattaya Prosecutor's Office determined the case was a wrongful arrest. It was found that convicted American paedophile Steven Strike, wanted on sex offences in Hawaii, had been living in the Pattaya townhouse where the boys alleged they were abused on one occasion.

Mr Hobbs believes that the case against him was not only one of mistaken identity, but also a "sting" operation involving US FBI agents, local police and a Pattaya-based NGO specialising in child protection, to boost their standing. He is now trying to launch multiple lawsuits seeking hundreds of millions of baht in compensation for damage to his reputation.

Mr Hobbs had spent four years in Thailand prior to his arrest, working for a Japanese multinational which did sub-contracting work for major companies and agencies such as the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. He earned an annual salary of seven million baht and married a Thai woman, Somporn, 36, who he has a son with.

"All I really want is a simple apology after what they have put me through," Mr Hobbs told *Spectrum*. "When the police held the press conference and spread the false information, it seemed so easy to do.

"But now that I have won that case and proved that I am not guilty, no one cares about helping me gain my reputation back."

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

During the working week, Mr Hobbs' main residence was a condo on Sukhumvit Soi 11 in Bangkok. After the birth of his son in 2011, he decided he didn't want his child to grow up in a big city. He bought a home in South Pattaya, which was run as a guesthouse, earning income for the family on top of the restaurant they already owned in his wife's name.

“

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CHRISTOPHER HOBBS

Mr Hobbs, who also holds Canadian citizenship, was busy at his job in Bangkok and says he only visited his family, who had relocated to Pattaya, every other weekend. In a police interview, a close Bangkok friend of Mr Hobbs, identified only as Stefan, said the engineer was working 12-hour days and had little time for socialising apart from "one to two beers" after work. He said Mr Hobbs was a married man who only seemed attracted to women.

Three years ago, Mr Hobbs met another friend in Pattaya, UK national Dan Clark, who he entered into a business partnership with. That friendship would lead to the predicament he is

PHOTOS: COURT DOCUMENTS



UNDER ARREST: Christopher Hobbs' detention at Pattaya Police Station was broadcast on Channel 3 and widely publicised, right. A policeman and NGO worker Palisorn Noja talk to Hobbs while he is in custody.

NO CCTV: Left, the gated Midtown Villa in Pattaya, where the alleged offences took place.

in today. Mr Hobbs agreed to set up a fruit juice business with Mr Clark, lending him the money to import juicing machines from China and a second-hand van for deliveries. To protect his investment, Mr Hobbs said the van was purchased and registered under his name.

Mr Clark had also made a new acquaintance: a tall, bearded, middle-aged American called "Steve", who rented a room above the three-storey townhouse from which he operated the juice business, in the gated Pattaya community of Midtown Villa.

The American was Steven Strike, 46, who had fled from Maui, Hawaii, after being indicted there for the sexual abuse of a boy aged under 14. Eight days after his arrest, Strike obtained a new passport and fled to Thailand. He stayed in the kingdom for 21 months until he was apprehended by the US Marshals Hawaii Fugitive Task Force and returned to face trial in December 2013.

Prior to the American's arrest, Mr Clark said he was unaware Strike, who is now serving a 10-year jail sentence in the US, was a fugitive from justice. Mr Clark told police Strike lived alone and he had never seen him take boys to his room.

RUNAWAY BOYS

In November 2012, "Oley", a Thai, and "Fuse", a Cambodian, were two vulnerable boys staying at the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Centre (ATCC) in Pattaya. The centre is run by Palisorn Noja, who allows an open-door policy for part-time residents. Both boys were classified as homeless children in need of temporary accommodation and were not treated as registered full-time residents of the centre. The boys came and went as they pleased.

Around mid-November, according to police documents, Oley met a foreign man in the red-light Walking Street area who took him to the Supasa Guesthouse, where they engaged in sex acts for a sum of 1,000 baht. Over the next month Oley performed similar acts on two other occasions with the same man, who police originally alleged was Mr Hobbs, in Walking Street and Soi Sunee, a street known for underage sex workers.

Both Oley and Fuse claimed they were later taken from a shopping mall by the same man, who was riding an orange motorbike, to a townhouse in Midtown Villa where they performed sex acts for 800 baht each. Oley said a week later he engaged in sex acts with the man again for 600 baht at a residence identified as MC Place.

The boys eventually returned to the centre and told staff what had happened to them. Mr Palisorn said a complaint was filed with police.

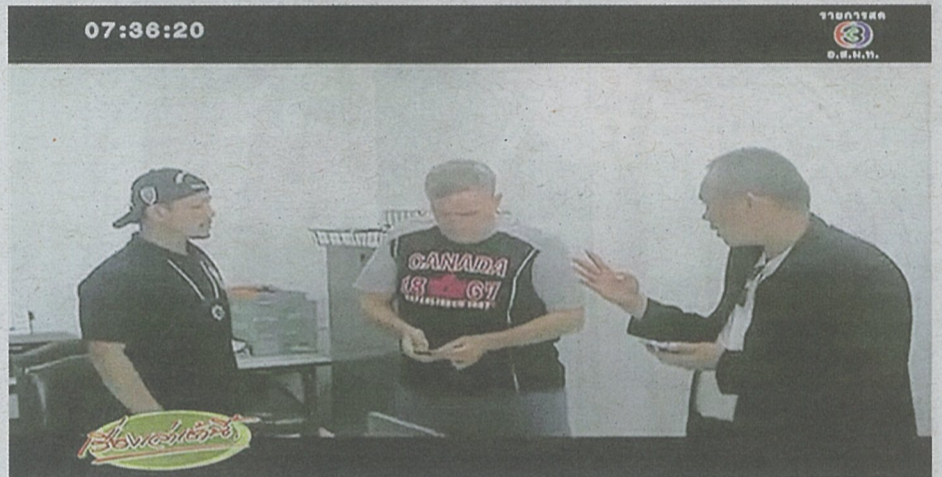
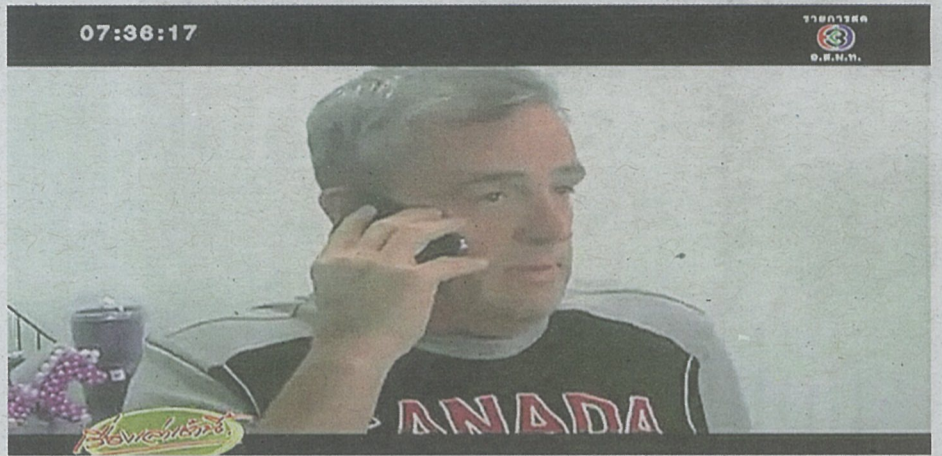
He said it is standard procedure whenever children are admitted to the centre to question them about their recent activities.

"When I get the details, I record them and keep that in the file of that child," Mr Palisorn explained. "But if any child has been molested before, I act as that child's parent and file a complaint to the police against the molester."

MAN WITH THE VAN

The only information that Pattaya police — led by Pol Lt Oomsin Sukkamka — had to go on in their search for the abuser were the statements of Oley and Fuse. The boys said the man went by the name "Dave" or "Mike", was American and had a beard. He had molested them at an unknown private residence in Midtown Villa which they were taken to on an orange motorbike.

Early last year, police started investigating homes in Midtown Villa, looking for an »



Canadian Passport
09-07-28



USA Passport
09-09-17



Qatar H2S
11-03-07



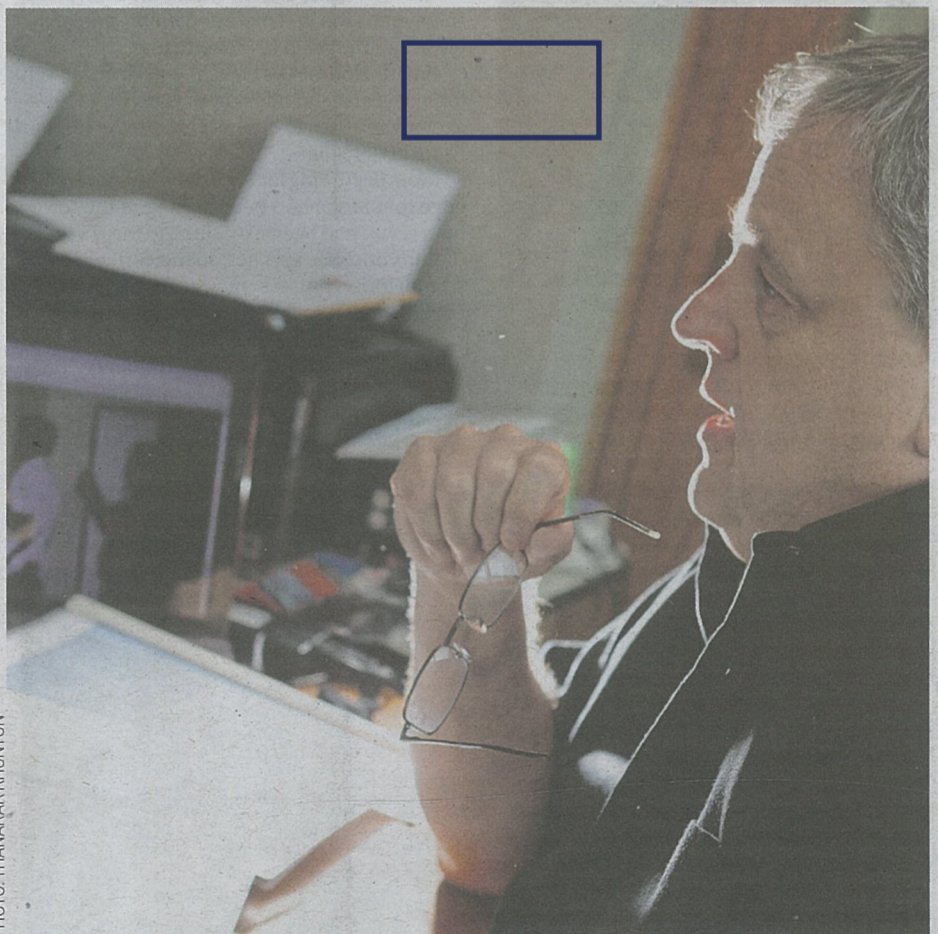
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MIX-UP: Passport photos of Christopher Hobbs bear a resemblance to paedophile Steven Strike, right.



COLLECTING EVIDENCE: Police take Christopher Hobbs to a house at Midtown Villa after his arrest to search for evidence, including an orange motorcycle central to the case.

PHOTO: THANARAK KHUNTUN



CHARGES DROPPED: Christopher Hobbs has been trying to clear his name.



LEADING THE FIGHT: Palisorn Noja, the director of the Anti Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Centre in Pattaya, pursues an average of 15 cases a year.



VULNERABLE: Street children in Pattaya.

» American matching the boys' description. When they ran a check on the van that was being used for the juice business, they found it was registered to Mr Hobbs. The engineer's records were accompanied by a 2009 passport photo of him still sporting a beard. The passport photo was shown to the boys, who claimed it was the same man who had molested them. One of the boys later retracted his statement.

But Mr Hobbs says he has been clean shaven for five years, and adds there is no CCTV footage or witnesses to connect him to the boys or to Midtown Villa.

More disturbing for Mr Hobbs was the knowledge that Strike had been staying at the townhouse, and had been extradited to the US seven months prior. He says he had met Strike socially several times, but was unaware of his past until Mr Clark told him about the extradition.

Mr Clark told police that Mr Hobbs had only visited the Midtown Villa residence "once or twice" to discuss business matters. On the day of Mr Hobbs' arrest, two FBI agents — one locally based and one from Los Angeles — were

on hand. Mr Hobbs said they interviewed him without Thai police present, which is in breach of FBI procedure in foreign jurisdictions.

Mr Hobbs claims he asked the FBI agents if they had told Thai police that Strike was living at the address when the boys were abused.

Mr Clark confirmed to Thai police that Strike had rented a floor of the Midtown Villa townhouse from May 2012 until his arrest in December 2013 for 10,000 baht a month. The FBI had played an active role in Strike's extradition, working in conjunction with the US Marshals Hawaii Fugitive Task Force.

Mr Clark also said Strike sometimes borrowed an orange motorbike left behind by a former company employee.

But Mr Hobbs said the two FBI agents told him to "forget about Strike" as he was in Hawaii. He said they advised him "to get a good lawyer, as you are now in the Thai legal system".

Although Mr Hobbs claimed he had been wrongly accused, he received no consular assistance from the US Embassy. Through his lawyers and under his own undertaking he made



FOREIGN FUNDS: The Austrian government is among those supporting Mr Palisorn's centre.



PARTNERS: Mr Palisorn at a meeting with US Homeland Security officials.

multiple requests and complaints to various US agencies, including the Justice Department, FBI, senators and congressmen.

Since his case was dropped, he has also filed a complaint with a Thai parliamentary justice committee against the chief investigating officer, Pol Lt Oomsin, and the complainant, Mr Palisorn.

Despite the case against him being dismissed, the consequences have been severe due to the publicity which followed his arrest, Mr Hobbs says. Much of the media coverage of the arrest remains online.

After he was charged Mr Hobbs returned to Bangkok to continue his work, but his employer told him they were uncomfortable with the ongoing investigation and asked him to resign. He refused, saying he had done nothing wrong. His employment contract was terminated in December last year.

Mr Hobbs spent close to five million baht over 14 months fighting the case. In August this year, the Pattaya Prosecutor's Office issued a final non-prosecution order — after Mr Palisorn dropped the complaint — based on insufficient evidence and unreliable testimony. It stated that the testimony of Oley was not believable and the Cambodian boy had changed his testimony to say that he had not gone to the townhouse.

The order identified Strike as the offender.

SUFFER THE CHILDREN

Mr Palisorn has become a sainted figure in the Thai media for his work at the ATCC in Pattaya, helping in the arrest of child sex offenders and caring for homeless children.

When asked about the case, without mention of any names, he quickly replied: "Mr Hobbs,



PHOTO: CHAIYOT YONGCHARENCHAI



PHOTOS: WWW.FACEBOOK.COM

OPEN HOUSE: The Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Abuse Centre, where the two boys stayed.

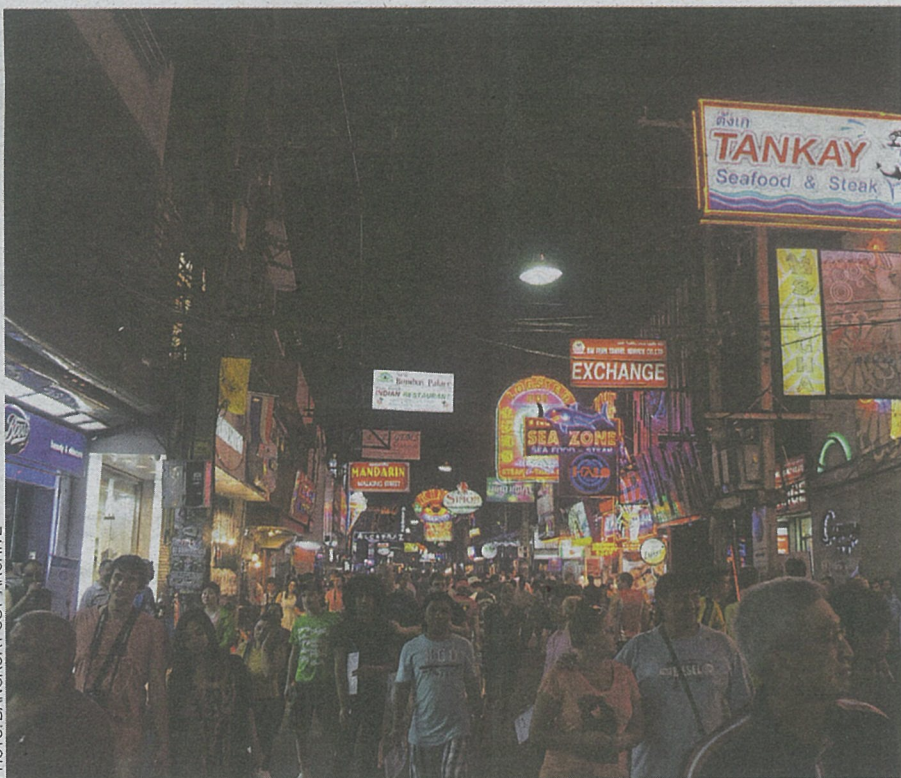


PHOTO: BANGKOK POST ARCHIVE

INFAMOUS: The two boys in the case claimed to have met their abuser in Pattaya's Walking Street.

I know him very well." As a regional anti-trafficking centre, the ATCC worked hand in glove with the now-defunct Children, Women, Family Protection and Anti-Human Trafficking Centre, which Pol Lt Oomsin was part of.

Mr Palisorn stands by the testimony of the two boys, but said because of police doubts raised over the molester's identity, he decided to drop the complaint. He said over the past six years the ATCC has pursued on average 15 cases of child sex abuse annually. On average, they lose one case a year.

Mr Hobbs is trying to sue both Mr Palisorn and Pol Lt Oomsin for 100 million baht each, but both cases have been dismissed. He plans to appeal and launch more lawsuits, including one against his former employer.

Mr Palisorn said it was the first time he had been hit with a lawsuit for his child protection work.

Mr Hobbs also drew attention to the close relationship between the FBI and Mr Palisorn's organisation, accusing the ATCC of pursuing child sex convictions in return for increased US funding via the Thai Justice Department. He said it was an "all too familiar story" that children would "escape" from Mr Palisorn's centre to have sex with foreigners and then report it to the NGO.

Mr Palisorn acknowledged that the NGO received funding and financial support from many foreign bodies including the Austrian government, US Homeland Security and private organisations.

He said he often worked with foreign law enforcement agencies in investigating sex abuse cases as he worked in the area and had local knowledge.

"It is not a big secret that we work with the FBI as well as local police," he explained. "I have a network all over Thailand in order to make my work easier. I help them and they can help us in return."

But he dismissed suggestions they pursued prosecutions for more overseas funding.

"I'm just trying to help children. I don't do this to get extra funding. Why would I work harder when my work is already hard? I just want to make sure that our children are safe from the perverts out there who see children as their toys."

When asked about the boys, he said both had left the centre as they were now aged over 15. He said Fuse had received vocational training and was now working as a waiter in Pattaya and Oley had returned to live with his father in Nonthaburi.

The FBI and US Homeland Security did not respond to *Spectrum's* requests for interviews.

KEEPING UP THE FIGHT

The Children, Women, Family Protection, and Anti-Human Trafficking Centre was dissolved after the military junta took control of the country in May last year. But Pol Lt Oomsin still works closely with Mr Palisorn in investigating child abuse cases in Pattaya.

When *Spectrum* contacted Pol Lt Oomsin for comment, he confirmed the unit had been disbanded and added he could not talk specifically about Mr Hobbs' case. "I'm just trying to do my job," he said.

Both Mr Palisorn and Pol Lt Oomsin were in the US recently for more training with the FBI and Homeland Security in Washington and Los Angeles, along with police from two regions and DSI officers working on child sex abuse cases.

Mr Palisorn said the training was in preparation for next month's launch of new units to investigate child abuse cases.

He said after consulting with foreign agencies around the world, he believes there are 174 "blacklisted" child sex offenders now living in Thailand.

Mr Palisorn now has 36 children under his care at the centre. He says he operates an "open centre", allowing the children to come and go as some are only homeless for a short time and may need temporary support. He said all the children are offered the option of staying at the centre full time under his guardianship.

CLEARING HIS NAME

Despite the charges being dismissed, Mr Hobbs still feels a deep sense of injustice.

His greatest frustration is that the US Justice Department refuses to investigate Strike for child sex crimes committed in Thailand. He alleges one of the reasons for the reticence is that any request for case files as part of a court disclosure would reveal he was framed by the FBI. He alleges this would lead to the exposure of the department, Mr Palisorn and the Royal Thai Police.

Mr Hobbs has sold his home in Pattaya and moved his family to Hua Hin for safety reasons. He still lives in his Bangkok condo during the week as he searches for a new job. The family is living off his savings, but Mr Hobbs says they are running low.

"Now if you search for my name, Christopher Hobbs, on the internet, the only thing that comes up is the news about me being a child sex offender," Mr Hobbs said.

"I have already lost seven million baht a year in income and five million baht for the lawyer. I really need to find a new job soon." ■



PHOTOS: THANARAK KHUNTON