

UK Charities Commission demands answers from Oxfam over Haiti scandal

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Managers of the charity used the services of prostitutes in Haiti and other crisis-ridden countries. The accusations (so far) relate only to private behaviour. But they reduce the public credibility of the charity, which still has a progressive image in the UK. The British government is exploiting the scandal to propose cuts to development aid.

The charities watchdog has demanded an urgent clarification from Oxfam GB after allegations that the charity covered up an inquiry into whether its staff used sex workers in Haiti during a 2011 post-earthquake relief effort.

The Charities Commission confirmed that it had received a report from Oxfam in August 2011 about an ongoing internal investigation into allegations of misconduct by Haiti programme staff members, including claims of inappropriate sexual behaviour, bullying, harassment and the intimidation of staff.

“The report to us stated there had been no allegations, or evidence, of any abuse of beneficiaries. It also made no mention of any potential sexual crimes involving minors,” the commission said. “Our approach to this matter would have been different had the full details that have been reported been disclosed to us at the time.

“We have written to the charity as a matter of urgency to request further information regarding the events in Haiti in 2011 to establish greater clarity on this matter. This includes a timeline of events, information about when the charity was made aware of specific allegations and the detail of the investigation’s findings and conclusions. This information will be considered as part of an ongoing case regarding the charity’s approach to safeguarding.”

The prime minister’s office said the watchdog should carry out a full and urgent investigation into the allegations.

“The reports of what is unacceptable behaviour by senior aid workers in Haiti are truly shocking,” a spokeswoman for Theresa May said. “We want to see Oxfam provide all the evidence they hold of the events to the Charity Commission for a full and urgent investigation of these very serious allegations.”

The Department for International Development (DfID) is reviewing its relationship with Oxfam. . A DfID spokesman said: “We acknowledge that hundreds of Oxfam staff have done no wrong and work tirelessly for the people they serve, but the handling by the senior team about this investigation and their openness with us and the charity commission showed a lack of judgment.

“We have a zero-tolerance policy for the type of activity that took place in this instance, and we expect our partners to as well. The secretary of state is reviewing our current work with Oxfam and

has requested a meeting with the senior team at the earliest opportunity.”

Oxfam allowed three men to resign and sacked four for gross misconduct after an inquiry into alleged sexual exploitation, the downloading of pornography, bullying and intimidation, a confidential 2011 report seen by the Times newspaper revealed.

One of the men allowed to resign without disciplinary action was Oxfam’s country director in Haiti, Roland van Hauwermeiren, who, according to the report, admitted using prostitutes at the villa rented for him by Oxfam with charitable funds. Prostitution is illegal in Haiti.

Oxfam informed the charity regulator about the broad nature of the allegations but without specific detail and failed to provide the watchdog with a final report.

It also emerged that one individual embroiled in the allegations went on to work at another leading aid charity, which was not told of his involvement. A spokeswoman for Mercy Corps said: “An individual allegedly involved in this situation worked for us from July 2015 to November 2016. As part of our normal hiring practice, we conducted reference checks and received positive references from his previous employers, including Oxfam.”

The report seen by the Times said there had been “a culture of impunity” among some staff in Haiti and concluded that children may have been among those sexually exploited by aid workers. It stated: “It cannot be ruled out that any of the prostitutes were under-aged.”

Oxfam’s press release when it announced the investigation in 2011 contained no specific details about sexual misconduct. It did, however, state the claims related to abuse of power and bullying and not fraud.

The charity said it had allowed Van Hauwermeiren to resign on the basis that he fully cooperated with and supported the investigation. It added: “Allegations that underage girls may have been involved were not proven.”

Oxfam’s chief executive, Mark Goldring, told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme that any references given to staff involved in the scandal, who later found other jobs, had not been officially sanctioned.

He said: “When the staff involved resigned in 2011, all were fired, Oxfam was very clear that we would not give them references. We recorded that on our own system, and we wrote to all of our offices across the world.

“But there is a real difference between an organisation giving a reference and individuals that have previously worked for an organisation giving references in individual capacities, and that’s what we believe will have happened.”

He denied a cover-up, saying: “With hindsight, I would much prefer that we had talked about sexual misconduct, but I don’t think it was in anyone’s best interest to be describing the details of the behaviour in a way that was actually going to draw extreme attention to it.”

The earthquake in Port-au-Prince in 2010 killed 220,000 people, injured 300,000 and left 1.5 million homeless. Oxfam was among a number of international aid organisations to descend on the country to provide support.

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/09/oxfam-pressed-over-claims-haiti-aid-workers-used-prostitutes>