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FORT WORTH

Fort Worth lab helps fight international child trafficking

Posted Saturday, Feb. 06, 2010

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FORT WORTH -- DNA samples from Haitian children displaced by last month's earthquake could soon arrive in Fort Worth as part of an urgent effort to deter human trafficking.

Dr. Arthur Eisenberg, a professor at the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth, is a collaborator in DNA-ProKids, an international humanitarian project that reunites trafficked children with their families.

DNA samples taken from children are entered into a database and compared with DNA from parents who reported their children missing.

In the last year, the project's creators have worked to establish databases in countries with high rates of trafficking, such as Guatemala, Thailand and the Philippines. Now they're rushing to deploy thousands of DNA collection kits to Haiti.

Human-rights groups and the U.S. government have been sounding alarms about the potential for trafficking, and concerns were heightened even more last week when 10 Americans were arrested on suspicion of trying to take 33 children out of Haiti without the proper documents.

Officials worry that children could wind up in forced prostitution rings or sweatshops.

"You see how many tens of thousands of children are on the street," said Eisenberg, who is co-director of UNT's Center for Human Identification. "You see this fervor to get them adopted out. In the meantime, parents don't know where their children are. Children don't know where their parents are. It is a rich source of trafficking victims."

In the trenches

Eisenberg was in the Philippines when the 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit Jan. 12, flattening buildings and killing more than 200,000 Haitians.

For years, he has traveled the world, helping other countries improve their DNA technology. Joining him in the Philippines was Dr. Jose Lorente, a longtime friend and professor at the University of Granada-Spain, with whom Eisenberg is developing ProKids.

Lorente has said the sight of children wandering streets alone in cities worldwide inspired him to start the project. He wondered where their families were. He also realized that without a way to identify them, it was impossible to guide them home.

"A baby doesn't know who they are," Eisenberg said. "Half of these kids working in sweatshops don't know where they came from."

Through the Haitian ambassador to Spain, Lorente offered the use of the ProKids system to reunite children with their parents amid the inevitable flood of adoptions.

With so many bodies still unidentified, it is hard to determine whose parents are alive or dead, Eisenberg said.

"If children are going to be adopted out rapidly, let's make sure we have their DNA profiles in the event that the parents are alive," Eisenberg said. "Although it may sound like the greatest thing for them to be sent to the United States ... there are some parents who want their children back."

ProKids is scrambling to get an initial supply of 5,000 to 6,000 DNA collection kits to Haiti. Once they arrive, people -- possibly United Nations representatives -- must be trained to take the samples. DNA can be collected through a finger prick. Workers in Haiti will take them by swabbing the inside of children's cheeks.

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