

Cambodia halts Utah company's export of human breast milk

March 20 2017, by Sopheng Cheang

Cambodia has suspended the export of human breast milk by a U.S.-based company pioneered by a former Mormon missionary.

A legal officer at Cambodia's Customs Department, Rath Nisay, said Tuesday that Finance Minister Aun Porn Moniroth recently signed a letter effectively stopping the sole exporter—U.S. company Ambrosia Labs Ltd.—from carrying out its business. The product is marketed as food for babies and as a supplement for adults with special needs, such as bodybuilders, and sells for as much as \$4 an ounce.

He said the suspension was mainly because of concerns about the health effect on babies of nursing mothers selling their milk, and that the Health Ministry would have to determine if human milk should be subject to regulation in the same category as human organs.

Ambrosia Labs stopped collecting breast milk about two weeks ago because the Utah company is applying for a license from the Health Ministry, said co-owner Ryan Newell. The application comes after Cambodia passed a law last summer banning organ trafficking, he said.

Newell said he and co-owner Bronzson Woods, who served a Mormon mission in Cambodia, are optimistic they will be able to continue operations once the Cambodian Health Ministry concludes its investigation and realizes that they are watching out for the health of about 30 Cambodian women who are paid for their breast milk. They also employ about 10 other support staff in Cambodia, he said.

The company, which was founded about two years ago, only allows up to two donations per day and requires that mothers wait until their children are at least 6 months old to donate breast milk, he said. That's the age that the World Health Organization recommends parents begin adding supplementary food into baby's diets, Newell said.

"We're not taking away from those children," said Newell, from the company's offices in Orem, Utah, south of Salt Lake City. "We're just taking the extra that those mothers would be losing at that point if they start weening their children."

The company exports to families in the United States who need breast milk for their babies, Newell said. Their clients included parents who've adopted children, used surrogates, and mothers having trouble producing their own breast milk, he said.

A woman who worked for Ambrosia Labs' affiliated company and supplier in Cambodia, Kun Meada, or Mother Gratitude, said it stopped collecting breast milk about a week ago because the company is applying for a license from the Health Ministry.

Kong Sopheakdey said about 20 women, mostly poor and living in slum areas, supply milk to the company, and each is paid 2,000 riel (50 cents) an ounce.

The company also provides bonuses for extra production and pays for transport to its office, she said. It also provides a free medical checkup to make sure the mothers are in good health and produce enough milk.

Newell said the women who donate may have to go back to working long shifts at garment factories or on the streets.

"We've been able to offer these women work where they are earning two-

to-three times what they would be making elsewhere," Newell said. "They're able to stay home with their kids more because they are not working the insane hours."

Nhem Channy, 29, said she has been selling her breast milk since she had her second child and earns about \$12 per day, supplying once in the morning and once in the afternoon. She had been a trash collector until a neighbor told her about the opportunity to sell her breast milk. Her husband is a construction worker but doesn't have regular work.

She said she cried when she heard about the export suspension because she supports her family, including three children, with her sales of breast milk.

"Now the company is closed, what will happen to our lives, we will live with hunger," she said in a telephone interview.

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