

# Herman Boonstra Testimony

Thank you inviting me, a foreigner to your country to give a testimony about the work of our international team of Village of Hope . It is a real honour for me to be here in your hearings My name is Herman Boonstra an I attest that the following information is true regarding the history of events leading up to and including my deportation from the country of Morocco.

My family and I first arrived in Morocco on 23 – 07 -1999., which happened to be the the day that King Hassan II died and a new promising era began under the reign of King Mohammed VI.

I began work as co-founder/director and foster parent for Village of Hope, still living in temporary rented accommodation in Ain Leuh, on 11th September 1999. This is an unpaid, volunteer position. It was just after having received permission from the local Commune of Ain Leuh, under direction of the Governor of Ifrane Province to reopen and rejuvenate the existing facility.

In April 2000, I applied for, and later received, a Carte d'Immatriculation, or residency permit, for one year. This permit was renewed again at least 4 – 5 times, and had been validated for another 5 years to come just prior to the time of my deportation from Morocco. At no time before 8 March 2010 have I ever been in Morocco illegally.

Village of Hope exists as a legal Association and Institution under Moroccan social care law. Its purpose is to provide permanent care for abandoned Moroccan children in several permanent family units with a mother and a father in each. These children are brought to Village of Hope by their birth mothers or the authorities, in most cases as newborns. Village of Hope does not go out and look for these children. Rather, they are brought to us. The Village of Hope does not pay for these children, and does not pay the mothers anything for receiving or caring for the children, or demand any kind of compensation of them. Before any child is taken into permanent care at Village of Hope, the birth mother must sign that they are giving up the child of their own free will, and that they have received no threat or inducement to do so.

My wife and I had 8 Moroccan foster children permanently in our care at the time of my deportation from Morocco, 3 boys and 5 girls, between ages 10 and 5. The Village of Hope at that time had 33 children in total with a plan and a growing capacity to increase the number to around 100. Those 33 children were taken care of by 6 couples, who had dedicated at least 18 years of their lives, to come and raise them. All of these families had been involved with childcare before in their different countries of origin. In addition there were 2 families of support staff who did not have any children in their care, but took responsibility for certain areas of the work. We also had accepted our first Moroccan couple raising children. They had 6 children in their care by early March 2010.

## WHAT HAPPENED ON MARCH 6-8, 2010.

On Saturday 6 March 2010, a large number of Gendarmerie Royale policemen arrived at Village of Hope. They said that they were there for a routine visit, and that



we had nothing to be concerned about. They interrogated volunteers, Moroccan employees and the Moroccan children throughout the day and late into the night, and searched the property. As Director I was involved right from the beginning and except for being interviewed myself, I had to also persuade all other volunteers, employees and later on children as well (only those between 7 -10 years old) to cooperate with the police, as they wanted to interview all of them. During the first hours in the late afternoon, early evening, the police went over all the paperwork related to the children and their mothers and asked questions about the ways we took them in, made sure that the mothers really needed and wanted to give them up and how we went about registering them at the commune with the moqaddem, how we gave them names and how we worked with the court in some cases and with the children's judge in Azrou. Of special interest was the status of the children: whether we had kefala over them or not. It has always been our understanding that we took care of the children for the local and national authorities, with the children's judge having the kefala over them. In any case all seemed to be in order in first instance.

The police then wanted to see the main building and we went there to have more appropriate space and time to talk to them. Here special interest went to the bookshelves we had and what was on them. (This part of the building was always locked, when not in use by us foreigners.) The books and CDs found there were of great interest, because they were listed by two of the policemen. We were assured this was nothing to be worried about: it was all part of the routine investigation. After playing a little table-tennis with the commander of the operation, he wanted to visit one of the family homes and my colleague Errol Muller volunteered to go to his home. Here he and a few other gendarmes were welcomed and were shown one of the children's bedrooms. The attention of the policemen went to the educational materials on a desk and then they also peeked into other cupboards and took out a few samples of the books and materials he found there and kept these apart. They also started up friendly conversations with the children...

We returned to the Dining Hall building and spent time in the salon area there. We were asked to call all the volunteers on-site, so they could answer some questions about the way they had known about VoH, the way they came, who supported them to come and what kind of work they were doing in the team/on-site. Whilst the local gendarme did this work, with me present to facilitate the communication between them and some my colleagues, the commander went with some of the other men to the different homes, without us knowing about it!! They inspected the bookshelves in all of our private homes, entering the rooms where the children were sleeping and picked up the materials of their interest: it now became clear the investigation was not simply routine, but we were reassured that all this was part of their mandate – nothing to worry about.

By now the interviews were almost all finished, the confiscated materials all listed by family home and statements drawn up that we had to sign later. We set out to eat – some of our women had made a tajine meal for all of us and then were told to also bring in the families who were not on-site at the time. It was already 23.30 by now and I persuaded the policemen to rather wait and let those two families report to them the next (Sunday) morning at the police station in Azrou. (Their children were already asleep!) They finally accepted this and left.



We closed up everything and switched off the lights. Only half an hour later, we were called and needed to open the offices, because one branch of the police wanted to make copies of all the children's files. We protested some, but they insisted and so we were in the office till 03.15 copying all files for them! By 03.30 we finally went to bed.

Apart from the two families that were interviewed in Azrou police station, everything remained quiet till around 16.00 the next day, Sunday, the 7<sup>th</sup>. Then the whole investigation started up from the beginning and this time there were cameramen to register all kinds of things on site, esp. the buildings, places where we had stored the books, where we dined, where the children played, the school and also inside the houses. (There never was a search warrant and when asking for permits, the commander just told me, not to worry, because it still was part of the routine inspection, and in Morocco they did not need such papers...) A few well trained, higher position special branch policemen asked me and the camera crew to make a tour and as we went from house to house and building to building they kept asking all kinds of questions about the way we raised our children. They gave the impression they liked the way we did things and reassured me and others again and again.

Whilst some policemen were busy in the offices with some of my colleagues, we then went up to the school, where after seeing the facilities they asked for some of the children of 7 years and up to come. The headmaster of the school was present by now and they set off to interview a couple of my own children and some of the Muller children. They were very friendly with them, even putting them on their lap, but soon they zeroed in on the way we taught religion in the home and in the school. After some time, it had already become dark and the children needed to eat and go to bed. The special branch people left at this time.

I went back to the salon area above the dining hall and here I was asked again to call in all the foreign workers for further interviewing, which I did. This time the questions were more about the way we gathered as foreigners for our times of prayer, the way we raised our children in the homes, the role each played etc. etc. Around 20.45 we were told to present more of our children for questioning by the police, but we flatly refused this time, both Errol Muller and myself, because the children already were in bed. We insisted this could wait till the next day and they relented. However till around midnight, various ones of our workers were interviewed in Arabic or French – which needed translation – and statements were drawn up, that needed to be explained again before being signed – quite a tedious and long-drawn process. When all was over we were told to get all the passports and residency cards for a routine check against the forms we had periodically sent to them over the years.

I made a special trip to two of our families who live off-site in Toufestalt and in Ajabou to collect theirs in the middle of the night and took them to the local police station. Upon my return, I wanted to go to bed, but again another branch of the police and the Caid wanted all copies of the children's files.... Another night of photocopying and explaining details – till around 03.15.

Next morning we had more police on site than the days before. They effectively blocked all entry and exit points and refused any of the kids or personnel to leave the sight now. Some of the work could not start as usual, because of their obstructions and check points. When asking about this, we were only told that it was part of our



protection and of the team doing the investigation. The special branch people continued to interview our children and we were all told to be on stand-by for any questions they might have for us. In the office we kept busy showing to police and then the King's attorney all the papers they wanted to check – and later copy them again! – this time it was about the cars, the way we managed the work, the school, the finances and the projects. Last but not least the papers of the bank accounts, the insurance and status of all the cars and the land property! At the end of the morning the attorney left us seemingly impressed and smiling and remarked: "We shall see each other again – in the end I will have to defend you!" – All other policemen now withdrew except for a few that had been posted as protection. We all made a sigh of relief and went home for a little to eat – it was way beyond lunch time, maybe 2.15 by now.

But not even an hour later Errol and I were asked to come to the office again by the police, to be told that: "I have news for you – and it is not good news: all of you foreigners will have to leave Morocco – you will be deported!" – We were then visited by the two special branch men who confirmed this and explained it was because of the way we had "proselytized" the children. We were told that this was decided by the governor of Ifrane and that we needed to call all the foreigners together so the commander of the investigation and deportation could announce it to all of us officially. We asked the teachers to recall the children to the school (it was just past 15.00) and to take care of them a little longer, whilst we would gather in the salon. Whilst we gathered and told all staff, the children stayed in the school building. After announcing this among ourselves and taking it in as a group, we were told by the commander what the outcome of the investigation had been and he read the formal charges against us from a letter in Arabic. He read it to us in French and I translated to all of the volunteers present. The letter was from the Governor of Ifrane and stated we had violated the laws of Morocco, had exploited the poverty of the children and their families and had proselytised the children. He then wanted all of us to sign that we had been properly notified, but the children had started screaming outside. We negotiated that the police would come to all family homes to get the necessary signatures, but we needed time for and with them. We also asked for all of us to have time to pack our goods till at least 23.00 that night.

We all returned to our respective homes with our children in complete disarray and needed to settle them first. However painful it was, I explained to my children that I needed to go because the police insisted. The panic was great and the screams and expressions of anger and unbelief were very forceful. It was the most painful I ever experienced. I needed then to pack my stuff – had no one to help, because my wife was in Holland and the caregivers all needed to pack themselves. Except for a little while, I was alone with the children without any help.

The employees wanted to stage a protest, even attack the police and the commander asked me to quell that kind of action in his place, "because they will listen to you!" I suggested for a moment that we might resist with them, but quickly realized that that would be bad in front of the children. (There were several ambulances and many more police cars with their lights flickering continuously – so how could we). I then explained to the employees that resistance wouldn't help and that they rather take over our work as fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles for the children and do it as they





had seen us do it.... They then agreed and we all wept together in the pouring rain and cold wintry winds.

The next few hours I tried to pack, encourage my children, call internationally and to friends in the immediate surroundings that might help in any way etc. etc. They were the most stressful hours of my life. By 20.30 the police already asked me to come to the car and then to the bus with my luggage – protesting was to no avail – and so by 20.45 I ran out of the house into the pouring rain with several of my children screaming and running after me. Only then substitute caregivers along with some of our closest employees helped the children back into the house. The next hour I called our other workers and hurried them up, arranged some things and gave advice to the new lady administrator, settled a few of the children of the other families, etc. By 21.40 we all left by bus – as it appeared the bus had already been stationed in the village of Ain Leuh from early in the morning.

Two police cars drove ahead of our bus and one behind us, blue lights flashing continually all the way to Casablanca Atlas Airport Hotel, where we arrived around 02.30. The next morning the one family after the other left on the respective flights they had been booked on by the authorities, leaving us Dutch till later that night for our flight to Spain. We were not permitted to leave even the floor on which we had our rooms.

#### REMARKS AND COMMENTS:

Neither I nor any of our co-workers do subscribe to the proselytism charges laid against us. We have for just over ten years sought to give a home, a hope and a future to abandoned Moroccan children. We believed we were doing both the children and the Kingdom of Morocco a service. That we did this from our own Christian motivation cannot be held against us all of a sudden, when from the beginning we have never hidden our own religion.

We had an open, even cordial relationship with local and provincial authorities, with whom we agreed to mutually accept our differences and deal with these sensitively and sensibly. How much we wished to have had such a relationship with some of the higher authorities responsible for the deportation. However we believe we adhered at all times to the legal guidelines. We honoured the King and with our children cheered him with banners and chanting on at least 3 occasions when he visited our region, during the course of the 10 years.

We lived and worked peacefully in our area, with a good balance of national and international volunteers and employees, with respect for each other's faith and convictions and encouraging one another to live lives according to these. On several occasions I have reprimanded and encouraged orally as well as in writing any of my muslim co-workers to be good muslims and the christian ones to pattern their lives after Christ. Most of us that have been deported would have preferred an open and honest evaluation of our work and a constructive dialogue about anything unacceptable taking place among us. In that way we could have improved whatever we did wrong!



Some of us, including myself, would have preferred to being tried and proven guilty of the charges in a court of law, because it would have given us an opportunity to explain ourselves and be defended on the basis of law. We would have been paying a fine, or served a sentence, but not at the expense of the dear children we left behind, whose lives have been deeply and negatively impacted by this rude and sudden separation from the only parents they have ever had.

At no time during the investigation or deportation process was a search warrant, deportation order or any other documentation of authority relating to this action presented to me. Only 4 hours before our deportation a signed statement by the Governor of Ifrane was read to us in French, which I translated to our staff. We had to each sign individually that we had been notified properly by the relative police officers, not that we understood it or agreed with its content! At no time was any one of us charged, tried or formally detained in Morocco for any crime under Moroccan law, including proselytism. As far as we are concerned we were deported for an unproven allegation for which we were not charged or tried.

Furthermore, most of our staff, including myself are limited in my speech in Classical Arabic and even Derija, the Moroccan dialect. Most of us did not read or write Arabic well and some were only conversant and able to read and express themselves in French. We did not have the wherewithal to be able to proselytise a Moroccan. Christian materials in our possession were only to educate and build up our own spiritual lives as Christians or the result of years of others bringing us such materials for our encouragement. We never used any of these materials to seduce or persuade muslims to become Christians. In fact we told christians to be good christians and muslims to be good muslims – as they had chosen themselves!

Furthermore, we as founders/directors of the work designed and explained to all foreign volunteers our stand with regards to evangelism and proselytism and made them sign our organisations 'non-proselytism' policy agreement and we have adhered to this policy at all times. We also asked teams and foreign volunteers to declare their intentions upfront and when they had such intentions to proselytise, not to come to us or implicate us. We have never had any incidents reported to us by the local police or authorities that this had been done.

May it hereby noted that all the finances needed to engage in and complete construction on-site at the Village of Hope, came in through donations from givers all over the globe, most especially from The United States and from Europe. Not only from individuals but also from visiting groups of tourists or volunteers, youth clubs, associations of a wide variety, businesses and churches. We also received encouraging donations from sources inside Morocco, such as poor neighbours, wealthy businessmen, local associations international schools and Embassies of various countries.

Subsequent Ambassadors of the United States, Mr. Mark Gabriel and Mr. Thomas Riley, came to visit us and expressed their happiness and lent their support. The Embassy in Rabat provided us with a 180.000 US\$ grant to construct our 300.000+ US\$ dining hall for a full complement of 100 children. The rest was raised by mostly American donors, and the local – muslim - construction company provided the rest. All those investments over the last 10 years, amounting to around 1,5 -2 million US\$



plus donations for food, clothing, education and wages for our employees now seem to be lost. Our bank accounts are frozen and all assets seized., but most tragically our children have broken family ties for the second time in their lives.

Out of the 33 children on the premises at the time of our deportation two, who were handicapped, have been transferred to other centres, because the present management and staff could not amply provide them with the needed care. Some of the others show signs of depression, others are very aggressive, even to policemen that they call robbers... Yet others are rebellious and have been harshly punished. There is proof of at least some maltreatment in some cases and several of the children get nerve calming drugs or anti depressants. As their parents we have great concern for the well being of our children, but we have no way to communicate to them, not even to send mail or have an occasional phone-call.

We hereby address ourselves to you as leaders of this great country that is built on principles of freedom and democracy, that promotes the dignity of human beings, regardless of race and creed and ask you to take a stand and give a strong signal to the Moroccan authorities that this sudden break with the traditional moderate Islam that has tolerance and peaceful co-existence with the other monotheistic religions is not acceptable. How can a moderate Moroccan Islam be willing to separate 33 children from the only parents they ever had?

We loved and still love Morocco, its King His Majesty Mohammed VI and her great peoples. We especially love the people of our region, many of whom became our friends, whose houses became our houses ours were always open to them. And even now my whole eam has but one

