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## At Trial in Chad, Aid Official Claims Backing on ‘Orphans’

By REUTERS

NDJAMENA, [Chad](#) (Reuters) — The leader of a French aid group accused of trying to kidnap 103 African children in Chad told a court on Friday that France’s government knew from the start about plans to rescue war orphans from [Darfur](#).

Rejecting accusations of abduction and fraud against him and five other members of the aid group, Zoé’s Ark, the leader, Eric Breteau, said they had taken charge of the children to save them from the conflict in Darfur, the Sudan region bordering Chad.

“We didn’t commit any offense,” Mr. Breteau said as the trial opened here in the capital.

The group was arrested in October when it tried to fly the children, who ranged in age from 1 to 10, out of Chad to Europe. Chadian officials said that the group had no permission to take the children out of the country, and that most came from Chad and were not orphans.

If convicted, the six could face forced-labor sentences of 5 to 20 years. But there is widespread expectation that they could serve any prison terms in France, or benefit from a pardon from Chad’s president, Idriss Déby.

“Before the launch of our operation to save the Darfur orphans, the French authorities as a whole were informed of our actions,” Mr. Breteau said. He said a network of families in France had been set up to receive the children.

The case has embarrassed France, which supports Mr. Déby’s rule in Chad, a former French colony. France stations troops here and is providing most of a [European Union](#)

peacekeeping force to be deployed in January to protect Chadians displaced by fighting between rebels and the government, as well as refugees from Darfur.

Two months before the arrest of the six, France's Foreign Ministry issued a warning about Zoé's Ark, saying there was no guarantee the children involved were helpless orphans and casting doubt on the project's legality.

Mr. Breteau said international rights conventions supported efforts to save war victims, like the children caught in the conflict in Darfur, which has killed an estimated 200,000 people since 2003.

Asked by the judge why some of the children were found to be Chadian and not Darfuri or orphans, Mr. Breteau said local intermediaries employed by Zoé's Ark had assured him the children had no living parents and came from Darfur.

Three Chadians and a Sudanese are being tried with the French as accomplices.

A lawyer representing parents of some of the children, who are claiming civil damages from the Zoé's Ark members, rejected Mr. Breteau's arguments. "Whether they are Darfur orphans or not, that doesn't change anything," said the lawyer, Ndintamaji Laminal.

Chadian and [United Nations](#) officials said most of the 103 children had at least one living parent and came from villages on the Chad-Sudan border.

The parents of several children said that they had been duped with the promise of schooling for them in eastern Chad, but that there had never been any mention of taking them to France.