

Battler nominated

LUKE PARKER - Western Leader

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Photo: LUKE PARKER

AID WORKER: Ron O'Grady with his Senior New Zealander of the Year nominee award

KIDDIE-PORN buster Ron O'Grady is on a mission to clean up the Internet.

He is also a seasoned campaigner against child trafficking and prostitution.

The Green Bay resident's efforts landed him among top senior nominees in the 2010 Senior New Zealander of the Year awards.

But the 79-year-old is not too interested in accolades. He has important work to do and is determined to keep going for as long as he is able.

"You don't do jobs like this because you want to get some reward - you do it because it's here," he says.

Mr O'Grady is the founder of End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking International (ECPAT), which started in Bangkok 20 years ago and now operates in 82 countries.

"These issues are hugely serious in countries like India and Thailand, where there are thousands of child prostitutes. There are thousands of children being trafficked for sex in eastern and western Europe," he says.

The father of three is retired but still acts as honorary president for the organisation, which does not take a religious or political stance.

He has been an aid worker since his late 20s.

"I was the first refugee resettlement officer in New Zealand and from there it just developed," he says.

He lived in Asia for several years before heading to the United States to teach in a university. He also spent three years as a director of overseas aid in Australia.

ECPAT was born in response to the growing problem of child sex tourism in Thailand.

Demand for its services grew quickly.

The United Nations estimates 1.2 million children are trafficked around the world every year.

"Seventy-nine per cent of all global trafficking is for sexual abuse. This includes very young children," Mr O'Grady says. "A lot of them will have up to 20 clients per night.

"They get absolutely nothing but the bare minimum of food and clothing and if they die or fall sick, they are taken away and forgotten about."

He says law differ from country to country and it can be difficult catching traffickers.

"You can't stop the demand and you can't stop and supply. But I think we can make a dent. We have to believe we are doing something useful - even if we are saving just one life."

ECPAT is funded by different agencies in the US and Europe.

It works closely with governments, including New Zealand's Internal Affairs Department.

Mr O'Grady says studies completed last year showed up to 50,000 attempts were made each by New Zealanders trying to access child pornography sites.

Most were unsuccessful.

"Everything goes through the censorship division and they will be blocked," he says.

"You can't get into illegal sites here very easily. But there is a huge demand."

"There is something like 10,000 illegal sites around the world and they keep changing all the time

"Monitoring them is a full-time process.

"We have a whole dedicated team in New Zealand. That's true of most countries now and they all work together internationally."

Mr O'Grady says child pornography has become a major task for law enforcement officers around the globe.

"I've worked very closely with interpol in France over the yeras and I have had to view child pornography during my meetings with them. It's ghastly stuff.

"There's been quite a noticeable change in the last two years with the age of children being abused on pornography sites lowering all the time.

"Child pornography is unquestionably getting worse. The ages are younger and the abuse is more serious and actute.

"The associations of child abusers around the world are also developing. They will link up in a network and go online in real time and watch an abuse. It's a shocking development."

Mr O'Grady says ECPAT also tries to rehabilitate young victims.

The grandfather-of-three says somem of the experience and situations he has encountered have definately affected him.

"I remember seeing five young Burmese girls who were all drugged," he says. "They had a dead look in their eyes. They just stood there. That stayed with me for an awful long time. I can still see them."

Mr O'Grady received a bronze medal from Save the Children Canada and was appointed an Officer of The New Zealander Order of Merit for Services to Children in 1998.