

State unable to extradite Australian educator wanted for sex abuse

Victims complain that court unable to advance proceedings against Malka Leifer, wanted for 74 counts of indecent acts and abuse at Jewish school, because of psychotic episodes

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For more than a year, the State Attorney's Office has been trying without success to extradite an ultra-Orthodox woman who is wanted in Australia on 74 counts of sexual assault against Jewish girls who were her students in a Melbourne school.

The woman, Malka Leifer, allegedly assaulted the girls while she was principal of the Adass Israel School in Melbourne, Australia, until 2008.

Leifer today lives in Bnei Brak, a largely ultra-Orthodox city in central Israel where she is under house arrest. She fled Australia to Israel, allegedly with the help of school employees, on the night she got wind of the allegations against her in 2008.

The school psychologist told Leifer that she was facing arrest, and on the same day the school staff bought plane tickets for her and her family, according to evidence presented at a civil trial in Australia last year.

Most of Leifer's alleged victims were 14-15 years old at the time of the assaults.

The Australian extradition request has been heard by Judge Amnon Cohen at the Jerusalem District Court, but thus far there have been no hearings in Leifer's case due to psychotic episodes she says she suffered before every single appearance in court, Israel Radio reported.

Her lawyers have asked the court to reject the extradition request due to her mental state. Mental health professionals, including the Jerusalem district psychiatrist, have confirmed that Leifer's panic attacks in court were genuine and said the process of a court hearing puts her under extreme pressure, the report said.

Some of the girls allegedly assaulted by Leifer are willing to testify against her and are awaiting her extradition in Australia. She is accused of sexual assault against minors, conducting penetrative acts of a sexual nature against minors and rape, according to Australian law.

Manny Waks — a recent immigrant to Israel from Australia who has championed for victims of sexual abuse in ultra-Orthodox communities since revealing that he had been molested by Chabad educators as a child — told Israel Radio that a third sister of the two alleged victims died recently in London, allegedly as a result of threats and intimidation.

Dr. Yitzhak Kadman, head of the Israel National Council for the Child, said some of the victims contacted the organization he heads in Israel. The “frustration and anger” felt by the victims over the fact that Israeli authorities have been unsuccessful in their efforts bringing Leifer to justice is “intolerable,” he said.

Kadman said his organization has been relaying to the State Attorney’s Office every bit of information he received from the Australian victims.

“I don’t think Israel should become an asylum for sex offenders and this is certainly not the way to receive [Jewish] immigration,” he said.

“We see again and again that this story of sexual assaults against minors in religious institutions is not solely a trademark of the Catholic Church,” Kadman said, adding that several such cases have already been exposed in Jewish educational institutions.

He said that if Leifer’s psychotic episodes were triggered by the pressure of appearing in court, the judge should come to her house and complete the extradition procedure.

But a statement from the court said that, “according to professionals’ medical opinions, a hearing cannot be held in the presence of Malka Leifer, and attempts to hold a hearing in her home are also impossible. No [tranquilizing] pill can help [calm her down] before a court hearing.”

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