

Center for troubled U.S. teens shut down by Mexican officials

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A center for troubled adolescents operating outside Ensenada has been shut down, and 13 American teenagers enrolled there have been returned to the United States, Mexican authorities announced yesterday.

The U-Turn For Christ Youth Ranch, a behavioral modification center supported by the Perris-based Calvary Chapel, was closed Friday after Mexican inspectors said they found a range of violations. Four American adults at the center were expelled and have been banned from Mexico for at least five years.

This is the first rehabilitation center to be targeted in Baja California since crackdowns last year led to the closures of four facilities operated by U.S. citizens in the Rosarito Beach-Ensenada area. Hundreds of American youths were sent home after those raids, and none of the centers has reopened, said Mark Leoni of the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana.

"As far as we know, this was the last behavior modification facility in Baja," Leoni said.

Mexican officials said the facility primarily treated youths with drug and alcohol problems through rehabilitation and "disciplinary methods similar to those of a youth correctional facility." It was in the rural community of El Zorrillo about 20 miles south of Ensenada.

"There was evidence of physical and mental mistreatment of the minors, as well as patients with insect bites without the proper medical attention," read a statement yesterday from the Baja California Health Secretariat.

Health officials could not be reached for comment.

Other violations cited in the statement included the lack of responsible physicians and the lack of workers trained in rehabilitation.

The facility did not have sufficient showers and bathrooms and recreational areas, according to the statement. The center had no clinical records detailing treatment, the statement said, but inspectors found "a large amount of expired foreign medication."

The center came to the attention of U.S. and Mexican officials last month after four adolescents ran away and alleged they had been mistreated, Leoni said. The allegations consisted of "minor physical abuse," he said.

U.S. consular officials inspected the center Nov. 10, but "we didn't find anything to substantiate the allegations," Leoni said.

Consulate staff was on hand early Friday when an interagency group of 65 agents and inspectors raided the center. The youths, ranging in age from 13 to 17, were interviewed and taken to the border, and accompanied

by a U.S. consular agent until they were delivered to church officials, Leoni said.

Church officials declined to comment yesterday, but sent a one-paragraph statement expressing hope that the center will reopen.

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