A board's burden

Lam says he did not decide salary, old board members remain silent

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THE rebuttal sounds familiar. Don't blame me, ask my board, Youth Challenge founder Vincent Lam said in a recent media interview, as he sought to deflect some of the finger-pointing at him.

"It wasn't me. I didn't decide how much to pay myself. Someone else who put the numbers together for the charity declared the income. It's not my fault," he told The New Paper on Wednesday.

The 45-year-old was also previously reported as saying that Youth Challenge's "previous boards of management have to explain" his $13,000 monthly salary, one of several issues regarding the charity's financial excess and mismanagement that has provoked public concern. Currently away in Malaysia, Mr Lam said he would "need time to think how best to respond to the public and give my side of the story".

The latest remarks by the ex-policeman, who resigned on Monday after 21 years at the charity's helm, sounded much like those made by the National Kidney Foundation's (NKF) ex-chief TT Durai. They also raise questions — yet again — on the board's role: Should Mr Lam be the only one taking the heat? Can or should past Youth Challenge board members be held accountable?

Some have argued the Youth Challenge case has a more important bearing than that of the NKF, due to its smaller scale of operations that many charities and institutions of a Public Character (IPC) here can identify with.

The duties and liabilities of those who sit on most charity boards are "less clear-cut" than company directors, said director of the Corporate Governance and Financial Reporting Centre, Associate Professor Mak Yuen Teen. Already, it is hard to prove that board directors of companies "slept" on the job, let alone in the case of a charity.

"Therefore, it may be difficult to take action against (past and present) boards for negligence or breaching their duties, unless there is an element of dishonesty or fraud involved. I don't think there is much you can do against the (previous) boards," he said.

The current Youth Challenge board — headed by lawyer Looi Teck Kheong — would only say that it is compiling minutes of past meetings and would liaise with auditors and lawyers on possible courses of action. But no attempt has been made as yet by the current board to reach their predecessors.

Interestingly, as one charity player pointed out, the only link between the current and past boards — who were invited by Mr Lam to join — is Mr Lam himself.

Attempts by TODAY to find out more about Youth Challenge's operations from some former board members were futile. Email requests and phone calls made over the past two days have largely gone unanswered. Only Ms Renee Ho-Phang and Mr Clinton Ang from the 2004-2006 board responded. But Mr Ang — the managing director of specialist wine importer Hock Tong Bee — politely declined to comment.