

Timor-Leste trial of the century plays out on social media

Supporters of ex-priest Richard Daschbach use repeated delays in his sex abuse trial to attack accusers, supporters

UCA News by Ryan Dagur, June 23, 2021

The sexual abuse trial of a defrocked priest in a Timor-Leste district court has descended into chaos following a series of postponements due to his using Covid-19 social restrictions as an excuse not to appear before judges.

Supporters of Richard Daschbach in the meantime have taken to social media to launch attacks on his alleged victims and those who support them.

The trial of the US-born former Divine Word priest is supposed to resume on July 5 following at least five postponements since the start of his trial in February.

He is accused of sexually abusing girls at the Topu Honis shelter in Kutet, in Timor-Leste's western enclave of Oecusse, which he founded in 1993.

Daschbach is also charged with child pornography and domestic violence and faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted. He is also wanted in the United States for alleged wire fraud.

Although the 84-year-old was sacked by the Vatican in 2018 after "an in-depth investigation" during which he was declared to have confessed to his crime, he continues to enjoy support in a country where many still consider him a hero for helping in the fight for independence from Indonesia.

On June 16, an online news portal, the Oekusi Post, which supports the ex-priest, launched an attack on rival portal Neon Metin for uploading an interview with some of the alleged victims on its YouTube channel.

The Oekusi Post claimed the video, in which the alleged victims recounted their experiences at the hands of Daschbach, was a hoax. The same claim was later disseminated by Daschbach's supporters on Facebook.

This led to Neon Metin taking to social media to defend the interview and asserting it was "true and based on facts."

"Neon Metin followed all standard journalistic procedures and got the consent of the victims to be filmed and published. Neon Metin is also committed to ensuring justice for the victims," its editor-in-chief Ato Lekinawa Costa said in a statement.

He called the Oekusi Post's criticism of the interview "a childish smear piece" and accused the portal of trying to instigate a miscarriage of justice.

In the past week, Daschbach's supporters have also disputed the ex-priest having written a letter to Society of the Divine Word leaders in Rome in 2018 in which he supposedly acknowledged the victims and pledged “to fully comply with any measure [penalties] that will be imposed.”

In a handwritten note dated June 18 and posted online, Daschbach said the letter was not his and “someone has faked it.”

“I would not write such a sloppy letter to Rome,” he wrote.

His supporters also posted photos on Facebook on June 19 purportedly showing several teenage girls who used to live at Topu Honis with Daschbach recently in Dili. The photos came with statements saying the girls had not been sexually abused as alleged.

Even Pradet, the agency that handles counseling for alleged victims, was accused of coercing alleged victims into accusing the priest. This allegation has been denied by Pradet, which said it operates under a strict code of ethics.

Rights groups have leapt to the agency’s defense. A non-governmental watchdog, the Judicial System Monitoring Program, said in a statement on June 22 that it would continue to support Pradet's work “in helping victims seek justice.”

The strain is also showing among the alleged victims. “It's just so disheartening to see what's happening,” a source close to the victims told UCA News. “Court delays, plus all this online intimidation, are really stressing the girls out.”

The trial that started on Feb. 22 has been adjourned five times, three of them because Daschbach was not present in the Oecussi district court, which is 200 kilometers from Dili where the priest is being held.

The last postponement was announced on June 10 after attempts to conduct the trial by video conferencing failed due to technical difficulties.

Claims made by Daschbach's supporters are unfounded, the source said.

The source was “100 percent sure” that the 2018 letter Daschbach denied writing to Divine Word leaders was written by him judging by the handwriting. “Not only am I sure that that handwriting is his but the wording is also exactly how he speaks and writes.”

The source added that the Facebook photos of the girls with Dashbach that were posted to dismiss the abuse allegations were troubling.

“All the alleged victims deserve privacy and protection. The Timorese justice system has a duty to protect these young women,” the source said.