News



A man arranges a banner with an image of Pope Francis Jan. 11, ahead of the papal visit to Santiago, Chile. (CNS/Pablo Sanhueza, Reuters)

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The Vatican was so concerned about the fallout from Chile's most notorious pedophile priest that it planned to ask three Chilean bishops accused of knowing about his decades-long crimes to resign and take a year's sabbatical — a revelation that comes just days before Pope Francis makes his first visit to Chile as pope.

A confidential 2015 letter from Francis, obtained by The Associated Press, details the behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the Vatican and Chile's bishops to deal with the prelates connected to the disgraced Rev. Fernando Karadima.

And it reveals the bishops' concern about Francis naming a Karadima protege, Bishop Juan Barros, to the helm of the diocese of Osorno — an appointment that roiled the diocese, with hundreds of priests and lay Catholics staging protests against him.

Those protests are expected to greet Francis during his visit to Chile, which begins Monday.

Chile's Catholic Church was thrown into crisis in 2010 when former parishioners publicly accused Karadima of sexually abusing them when they were minors, starting in the 1980s — accusations they had made years earlier to Chilean church leaders but that were ignored.

The scandal grew as Chilean prosecutors and Vatican investigators took testimony from the victims, who accused Barros and other Karadima proteges of having witnessed the abuse and doing nothing about it.

In his Jan. 31, 2015, letter, written in response to Chilean church leaders' complaints about the Barros appointment, Francis revealed for the first time that he knew that the issue was controversial and that his ambassador in Chile had tried to find a way to contain the damage well before the case made headlines.

"Thank you for having openly demonstrated the concern that you have about the appointment of Monsignor Juan Barros," Francis wrote in the letter, addressed to the executive committee of the Chilean bishops' conference. "I understand what you're telling me and I'm aware that the situation of the church in Chile is difficult due to the trials you've had to undergo."

Francis told the committee that his ambassador, Monsignor Ivo Scapolo, had asked Barros to resign in 2014 as bishop to Chile's armed forces, a high-profile post, and had "encouraged him to take a sabbatical year before assuming any other pastoral responsibility as a bishop."

Barros was told a similar exit strategy had been planned for two other Karadima-trained bishops, but was asked not to share the information, the pope wrote. He said the plan went awry when Barros named the two others in his letter stepping down as military bishop — a development that posed "a serious problem," and "blocked any eventual path, in the sense of offering a year of sabbatical," to remove the three from the eye of the storm roiling the Chilean church.

In the end, Francis went through with the appointment of Barros as bishop of Osorno, 600 miles (900 kilometers) south of Santiago.

Barros had been a protege of Karadima, a charismatic preacher who ministered to Chile's elite in a posh suburb of Santiago, where his El Bosque parish community produced dozens of priestly vocations and five bishops, Barros among them. Chile's church leadership for years had ignored complaints about Karadima's sexual abuse of minors and only took action after victims went public with their claims in 2010.

Karadima was sanctioned in 2011 by the Vatican, which removed him from all pastoral duties and sentenced him to a lifetime of penance and prayer for his crimes. Chilean prosecutors investigated Karadima as well but dropped the charges

because the statute of limitations had expired. The judge handling the case stressed that it didn't collapse for lack of proof.

Some of Karadima's victims say Barros and other Karadima-trained bishops witnessed and tolerated Karadima's abuse and then kept quiet about it. Francis' appointment of Barros has thus been a stain on his oft-repeated "zero tolerance" for abuse, with even members of his own sexual abuse advisory commission criticizing it.

Francis has since defended Barros, saying the Osorno opposition to him was "stupid," unfounded and coming from the left. After the uproar over the appointment, the Vatican took the unusual step of defending it publicly by saying the Vatican's bishops office had "carefully" examined Barros' record and found no "objective reason" to block the nomination.

The Vatican spokesman, Greg Burke, declined to comment on the pope's 2015 letter, and calls and emails placed to members of the Chilean bishops' conference about the letter were not returned.

Asked about the planned protests by Osorno parishioners during Francis' trip to Chile, Burke said the Vatican had "maximum respect" for their right to do so. But he said no papal meetings were planned with the Osorno group, which had formally requested to meet with the pope in July but were told by Vatican organizers that his schedule was already final, some six months before the trip.

Barros said he knew nothing of the pope's letter and repeated his position that he knew nothing of Karadima's crimes.

"I never knew anything about, nor ever imagined the serious abuses which that priest committed against the victims," he told the AP.

"I have never approved of nor participated in such serious dishonest acts and I have never been convicted by any tribunal of such things," Barros added.

Juan Carlos Cruz, who says Karadima sexually abused him when he was a teenager in the 1980s, told the AP that Barros and the other bishops Karadima trained were well aware of the abuse and even witnessed it. He said two of the bishops kissed Karadima "and put their heads on his shoulder and touched him, for 37 years, but now they have forgotten."

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The Karadima scandal has contributed to a severe crisis in the Chilean church, including a dramatic drop in new seminarians, a 20 percent decline in the number of people identifying themselves as Catholics and a growth in evangelical churches. Francis is expected to offer encouragement to the church and Chilean Catholics during his visit.

On Wednesday (Jan. 10), the online database on the abuse crisis, BishopAccountaiblity.org, released research showing at least 78 priests or members of religious orders had been credibly abused or convicted of sexually abusing minors in Chile, but that the number was likely far higher. Chile has about 2,300 priests.

This story appears in the **Francis in Chile and Peru** feature series. View the full series.