News



Richard Daschbach, a former missionary from Pennsylvania, is escorted by a police officer upon his arrival for a trial at a courthouse in Oecusse, East Timor on Feb. 23, 2021. (AP Photo/Raimundos Oki, File)

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Oecusse, East Timor — December 21, 2021

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A defrocked American priest accused of sexually abusing orphaned and disadvantaged young girls under his care in East Timor was found guilty Tuesday and sentenced to 12 years in prison, in the first case of its kind in the staunchly Catholic nation.

Richard Daschbach, 84, who spent decades as a missionary in the country's remote enclave of Oecusse, faced charges of child sexual abuse as well as child pornography and domestic violence.

The trial began in February but was postponed several times before concluding last month. During the proceedings, victims complained about threats and online attacks. Daschbach maintains strong backing from some, including former President Xanana Gusmao, who went to the court on Tuesday. East Timor is the most Catholic place outside the Vatican and Daschbach is revered for his role during the tiny Southeast Asian nation's fight for independence.

The church and foreign donors who once supported Daschbach's shelter said he confessed to the abuse, but the former priest and his lawyers have at various times refused to comment. They did not make their legal strategy public and court proceedings were closed.

Daschbach, the son of a Pittsburgh steelworker, was ordained in 1964 by the Society of the Divine Word at its headquarters outside of Chicago. He arrived in the country now known as East Timor several years later, setting up a shelter in the 1990s named Topu Honis, which means "Guide to Life."

Hundreds of children passed through the shelter under Daschbach's care. More than a dozen females came forward with abuse claims, but only nine were registered in the case due to legal technicalities. The Associated Press spoke with five of the accusers.

They recalled their experiences in vivid detail, saying Daschbach kept a list of young girls on his bedroom door and that every night one of those girls would sit on his lap, surrounded by a ring of children and staff members praying and singing hymns before bed.

They said the girl on his lap would then sleep with him that night and that various types of abuse — from oral sex to rape — would occur, sometimes involving other

children too. The accusers have not been identified because of fears of retribution.

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Daschbach’s lawyer, Julio Farma, said they are disappointed with the court’s verdict and plan to appeal the decision issued by the three judges.

“Evidence provided by the shelter matron and former students who lived in the orphanage were ignored by the court,” Farma told reporters, alleging that some accusers changed their statements made earlier to authorities in Oecusse after being taken to the capital, Dili, and the new statements became the sole basis for the judges’ decision.

“We cannot accept this and will appeal,” Farma said.

Dozens of Daschbach’s supporters, including several children brought by Gusmao from Dili, wept and some were screaming as it became clear the court would sentence the former priest to jail. Some in the impoverished enclave revere Daschbach so highly, they believe he possesses special powers and is the victim of a conspiracy.

In a statement Tuesday, JU,S Jurídico Social, a group of human rights lawyers representing the accusers, applauded the verdict but said it would appeal, arguing that the sentence should be harsher. Under the law, Daschbach faced more than twice the prison time he received.

“The history written today is a bitter history for the entire nation,” the group said. “Our children were subjected to horrendous crimes for such a long time because we, as a society, were blinded by the belief that a figure as the defendant in this case would not commit such crimes against children.”

Separately, a U.S. federal grand jury in Washington, D.C., indicted Daschbach in August. He faces seven counts of engaging in illicit sexual conduct at the shelter. If convicted in the U.S., Daschbach could receive up to 30 years in prison for each count, but the Department of Justice has not said whether it plans to try to extradite the ex-priest.

Daschbach also is wanted in the U.S. on three counts of wire fraud linked to one of his California-based donors, which accused him in a court case of violating an

agreement to protect those under his care. An Interpol “Red Notice” has been issued internationally for Daschbach's arrest.