News



From left, Luis Arguello, the president of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, Angel Gabilondo, the Ombudsman and Felix Bolanos the Minister of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with Parliament after the signing of an agreement to provide redress to victims of time-barred abuse in Madrid, Spain, Monday, March 30, 2026. (Alberto Ortega/Europa Press via AP)

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Spain's Catholic bishops and the Spanish government took another step Monday toward compensating victims of sexual abuse by clergy members who have died or whose possible crimes are too old to be prosecuted.

In January, Spain's Catholic bishops agreed to let the country's ombudsman have the final say in the church's compensation of such victims. The government and Spain's bishops signed paperwork Monday detailing how the new church-state reparation system, which takes effect April 15, would work.

The agreement, which envisages a one-year window for claims, marks a rare concession by the Catholic hierarchy. It's aimed at resolving disagreements between the left-wing government and church authorities over reparations after victims criticized the church's original in-house compensation proposal.

Archbishop Luis Argüello, the president of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, said the text will not include number amounts for the compensation that sexual abuse victims could receive.

"We wanted to exclude references to scales and quantities; that's not what this is about," Argüello said. "We've planned for the teams to start working on how to do it, but the text doesn't establish a range or a specific amount."

While church authorities in many Western European countries have created compensation plans for abuse victims, either run by the church or independent experts, the Spanish process is unusual because of the involvement of the state itself in the process.

Justice Minister Félix Bolaños on Monday said that the system would evaluate reparations case by case, based on factors like severity, the victim's age and the recurrence of the abuse.

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"Criteria are set to arrive at fair compensation, which should not be determined by a single figure," Bolaños said.

In recent years, the once staunchly Catholic Spain has begun to reckon with a decades-long legacy of abuse by priests and cover-up by generations of bishops and religious superiors, mainly thanks to the initial reporting by newspaper El País.

Spain's Parliament tasked the country's ombudsman to investigate and in 2023 the ombudsman delivered a damning 800-page report that investigated 487 known cases of sexual abuse and included a survey that calculated the number of possible victims could reach the hundreds of thousands.

Spain's bishops rejected that estimate, saying its own investigation had uncovered 728 sexual abusers within the church since 1945. It said that most of the crimes had occurred before 1990 and that 60% of the aggressors were now dead.

Under the new agreement, victims can approach Spain's Justice Ministry with their initial petition. The ministry will pass it on to the ombudsman, who will study it and propose a compensation package that the church's committee will then assess.

If no agreement can be reached with the church and the victim, the case will go to a joint committee with representatives of the church, the ombudsman's office and victims' associations. If that committee can't agree, the ombudsman's decision will stand, Bolaños said in January.

On Monday, Bolaños called the agreement a world first in which "the state has the final say and the church pays the reparations due to each victim."