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Dutch report on clergy abuse expected in April

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

WARSAW, Poland -- An independent church inquiry into alleged sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in the Netherlands will submit its report by late April, according to a spokesman for the Dutch bishops.

"Although we don't yet know how the investigations will be carried out, and which organizations will be asked to help, we know the inquiry will be independent and vigorous," said Bert Elbertse, communications director for the Dutch bishops' conference.

"Although initial reactions to these accusations were very negative, of course, current newspaper coverage and public comments suggest people are waiting sympathetically to see what comes of the investigation," he said.

Elbertse's comments came after the investigation into alleged abuse by priests at Dutch church schools was announced in a March 9 statement by the bishops after their plenary meeting in Zeist.

In a March 11 interview with Catholic News Service, Elbertse said individual criminal cases would take longer to investigate and follow up. Wim Deetman, a state council member and former education minister tasked with heading the inquiry, planned to outline his plans for the investigation March 12.

"As a Protestant, he's well known in church organizations, and can easily find the right people and means to help him," Elbertse said.

About 350 people have registered abuse claims since late February with the church's Help and Law organization, set up in 1995 by the Dutch bishops to help alleged victims.

Jan Waaijer, the organization's spokesman, said March 9 he was shocked by the "flood of claims."

In their March 9 statement, the bishops said they were "deeply affected" by the "moving stories of sexual abuse," which violated human dignity and Gospel values and deserved "powerful condemnation."

The bishops also said that a "broad, external and independent investigation" by Deetman was a priority. They named Bishop Gerard de Korte of Groningen and Leeuwarden as "referee and spokesman" for the bishops' conference on the issue.

Elbertse told CNS said Bishop de Korte could be expected to play a role similar to Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier, recently named to oversee abuse claims for the church in neighboring Germany.

He added that the Help and Law organization had already given the church experience in handling accusations, and said he was not aware of any cases of attempted blackmail against Dutch clergy.

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"Most complaints seem to relate to events many years ago," Elbertse said.

"Although Dutch politicians and parties have reacted in various ways to our handling of this controversy, I haven't seen any signs so far that anyone is using it to undermine and eliminate the church," he added.

Speaking March 9, Bishop de Korte said the bishops' conference had entrusted the investigation to "somebody from outside the Roman Catholic circle," to show "we are striving for as open an investigation as possible and that we as the Catholic Church do not want to hide anything."

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