

## Ramos-Horta: priest who sexually abused children in Timor-Leste should be in prison

By **Tempo Timor**

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Former President, Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and the 1996 co Peace Prize Winner in his office during interview by Tempo Timor this week.

Former president and Nobel prize winner José Ramos-Horta says the authorities of Timor-Leste should have arrested and detained the American priest who is accused of sexually abusing children in a shelter in the enclave of Oecusse. 'Justice must be done. I am not going to advocate any other avenue,' says Ramos-Horta, underlining he speaks as a citizen.

In February 2018 the congregation Societas Verbi Divini (SVD) received information accusing Richard Daschbach, an American priest who had set up Topu Honis Shelter Home in two locations in Oecusse in 1992, of sexual abuse of minors. The alleged crimes took place in the orphanage for young children in the isolated mountain village of Kutet.

Immediately the SVD sent its regional superior to Oecusse to take Daschbach to Dili, Timor Leste's capital city, while starting investigations and informing the Vatican and Timorese police and prosecution. However, in August 2018, Daschbach suddenly resigned from SVD and went back to Kutet, living among the community where he committed the sexual abuse. 'It is wrong that he is in that place,' says Ramos-Horta, who was 'stunned' when he learned that the priest 'was allowed to go back' to Oecusse, while 'there are legal grounds to prevent him from being there and restrain him.'

The former president doesn't know why the authorities did not take such steps. 'But they should have arrested him and put him in Becora (prison). As simple as that. There are so many people in our prison for stealing a cow, a buffalo or a goat, awaiting trial, why wouldn't he be in preventive imprisonment.'

Currently there are concerns that children who used to live in Topu Honis are being threatened to prevent them from speaking to the police and prosecutor about their experiences. Ramos-Horta says he hasn't been informed about such threats, but stresses that if these reports are true, victims and witnesses 'need police protection.' Thinking about their ordeal he says: 'These are young Timorese kids, orphans and poor people. God, how can they do that to people who are already so poor, who go to a boarding place to seek refuge and shelter, and then they are abused, and then they are threatened.' He warns people that if they intimidate victims and witnesses, 'they are liable to be prosecuted as well.'

Ramos-Horta says that concerted action is needed. 'The government can't only condemn and extend sympathy to the children, but has to look immediately at how to help those kids.' The ministry of solidarity should be involved in financing the shelter, and 'the bishop could send a church commission, preferably consisting of nuns, to go and take over the administration of the place and start looking after the children.' NGO's like Fokupers and the Alola Foundation could be asked to support victims.

'There has to come money for the orphanage to be able to continue operating, to clean up the place, to give the children food, medical checks, security, psychological and emotional support.' If necessary the police should provide security to the shelter.

This isn't the first time Ramos-Horta hears about these wrongs. Some five years ago there were 'credible' indications about dire conditions in the shelter. 'I was told the place was dirty, children were mistreated and there was not enough food,' Ramos-Horta says, adding that he then met foreigners who were enthusiastic and supported the shelter.

Apart from taking action in this particular case, Ramos-Horta calls upon the government to 'design a long-term strategy' to investigate if there are more situations of sexual abuse by church personnel in Timor-Leste. 'Throughout the world this kind of abuse of children and even of nuns has happened,' he says, referring to the many cases that have come to light in Europe, the Americas and Australia in recent years.