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## Former priest on trial for sex abuse in Timor Leste

*American accused of abusing children younger than 14 in a home for disadvantaged youth that he founded and ran.*



A police officer escorts Richard Daschbach, a former missionary from Pennsylvania, on his arrival for trial on sex abuse charges [Raimundos Oki/AP]

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The trial of a defrocked American priest charged with sexually abusing young girls at his shelter for orphans and children from impoverished families in East Timor, now known as Timor Leste, began on Tuesday.

Richard Daschbach, 84, a former missionary from Pennsylvania, faces 14 counts of sexual abuse of children younger than 14 years old, as well as one count each of child pornography and domestic violence, according to the prosecutor general. He faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

It is the first clergy sexual abuse case to emerge in the Southeast Asian nation of about three million people, where 97 percent of the population is Catholic.

Some 100 supporters of Daschbach showed up but were denied entry to the court for the closed proceedings, which have sharply divided by the country. The case has pitted families and politicians against one another, with tensions so high accusers fear they will be targeted with violence if publicly identified.

Former President Xanana Gusmao was briefly present in the courtroom with Daschbach on Tuesday. The former revolutionary leader is still powerful in the country and some – including his own children – have [questioned](#) why he is publicly supporting a man accused of abusing children.

### **At least 15 accusers**

The alleged abuse took place at Topu Honis, a children's home that Daschbach founded and ran, taking in hundreds of young people, providing them with food, clothing, shelter and schooling.

At least 15 females have since come forward, according to JU,S Jurídico Social, a group of human rights lawyers representing the accusers. But foreign donors who once supported Daschbach believe there are probably many more victims – possibly hundreds.

Daschbach was defrocked in 2018 after he confessed to sexually abusing the children.

The female accusers have alleged everything from fondling and oral sex to rape. Former donors have also said he admitted the assaults to them.

Last month, the former priest told local reporters his message to the children in the orphanage was: “Be patient. We won't meet again because I will be detained for life, but I will still remember you and you have to be happy there.”

Daschbach, who also secured American funding, is also wanted in the US on three counts of wire fraud. An Interpol Red Notice has been issued for his arrest.