

## The disgraced priest, the children's shelter and a fight for justice in East Timor

Sydney Morning Herald, June 7, 2021 *By Chris Barrett*

**Singapore:** The road up to the village of Kutet in East Timor's western enclave of Oecusse is so rough that most highlanders walk the jungle trail when they need to visit the coast.

Often hauling bags of rice on their backs, the steep and rocky journey takes them up to three hours if they're fit.



The main street in Kutet.

It's a path that has also been often taken by outsiders, who have emerged over the crest of the mountainous terrain to find a remote, poor settlement with a deep history of inter-tribal politics and where the locals believed in various spirits.

At Kutet's centre is a shelter for girls and boys that for many years was run by American Catholic priest and Timorese independence hero Richard Daschbach. There, visitors would witness a serene setting with children playing marbles, with jump ropes and running around apparently as happy as can be.

Daschbach, who established the Topu Honis shelter there in 1991 and another for older children at coastal Mahata, was revered to the extent the children and the villagers believed he had magical powers.

"Everyone we spoke to thought he was the male equivalent of Mother Teresa," said Tony Hamilton, a family business owner in Brisbane who was one of the shelter's biggest financial supporters.

But it was all an illusion.



Richard Daschbach holds a Christmas eve mass at the shelter.

Daschbach, 84, is due to learn his fate this week after being charged with systematic sexual abuse of girls under the age of 14 at the shelter. He would tape a list of their names to his door outlining which one of them he would abuse each night after evening prayer.

The mother of two of the girls told Portuguese news agency Lusa she “passed out” when she learnt her daughters had been abused. “My girls said it happened to everyone. But nobody said anything,” she said.

A scandal of enormous proportions in a country that is almost universally Catholic, observers believe it could be the tipping point for other victims of abuse to come forward in East Timor.

But the road to the five-day hearing in Oecusse, due to start on Monday, has been plagued by concerns of political interference and about mudslinging and counterclaims by the church itself in East Timor. Prosecutors have also twice been replaced.



Daschbach at Topu Honis in 2010. *Credit: AP*

On top of that, there have been three delays to the trial – [the latest last month when Daschbach, under house arrest in Dili, failed to show up, citing the COVID-19 outbreak](#) – which have exacerbated the psychological trauma of victims, according to the human rights law firm representing them.

Hamilton, who flew to Dili with fellow Australian donor Jan McColl when they were first alerted to allegations of abuse in March 2018, has been seeking justice for the 15 complainants and the many more he believes are out there for more than three years now.

It is a journey that has taken him to Rome, the headquarters of the Society of the Divine Word, or SVD, the church's largest missionary order. It defrocked Daschbach three years ago after the priest confessed to the abuse.



Daschbach's handwritten note. *Credit:*

In a note he wrote to the order, contained as part of a letter sent by Hamilton to Archbishop of Brisbane Mark Coleridge on September 15 last year, Daschbach said “the victims could be anyone from about 2012 back to 1991, which is a long time”.

Hundreds of girls lived at the shelter during those years and before its opening Daschbach had been in East Timor since the 1960s.

“It is impossible for me to remember even the faces of many of them, let alone the names – who the victims are I haven't the faintest idea,” the priest wrote in the letter, which was dated March 15, 2018.

“I will fully comply with any measure [penalties] that will be imposed.”

Hamilton and McColl said Daschbach owned up to the abuse when they confronted him in Dili that month.

“He just admitted everything ... [he said] ‘this is who I am, I've always been this way’,” Hamilton said.

“He went into great detail about how he slept with the girls, he masturbated them, he had oral sex with them but there was never sexual penetration. That [last part] proved to be a lie. I was physically ill, I just left,” said Hamilton, whose firm Logix Engineering began supporting the shelter financially in 2014.

While Daschbach was swiftly removed by the Society of the Divine Word, who picked him up on a helicopter and then laicised him, his criminal prosecution has been more complicated, with influential forces at play.

Among them has been the Catholic Church. The Metropolitan Archdiocese of Dili's Justice and Peace Commission filed a report last year that rubbished the claims against Daschbach. It also named the victims and alleged that NGOs and supporters that had helped the girls had been involved in organised crime, human trafficking, and exploitation of children by having them medically examined and said they were guilty of the "crime of justice mafia".

Lawyers for the victims sued the church for defamation while the priest who signed the report was sacked by Dili Archbishop Virgilio do Carmo da Silva as director of the Justice and Peace Commission.

Hamilton, however, says the church and the order have not supported victims, who have been the targets of intimidation, largely online.



Children sifting rice at the shelter. *Credit:AP*

Attempts to speak to Archbishop da Silva in Dili were not successful but Father William Burt of the SVB said the order had been offering financial support to victims but had been thwarted by a lack of co-operation from those now running the shelter.

"Daschbach was kicked out of our order as soon as the child abuse came to light. He has no support from us at all ... we want the man to be brought to justice," Father Burt said.

The SVB's representatives in Dili have also discussed helping the victims with East Timor's Deputy Minister of Social Solidarity Signi Verdial, according to a memo sent to the order's global chief in Rome in March. But the memo said that the case had been politicised so much that "the children at Topu Honis are not ready to accept anyone there".

The role of former president Xanana Gusmao in backing Daschbach has been the subject of great intrigue. The national icon appeared as a witness for the church in the defamation hearing, was pictured feeding birthday cake to the disgraced priest in January and in February took the twice-weekly 13-hour ferry from Dili to Oecusse with Daschbach and his entourage.

The discredited Justice and Peace Commission report also said Gusmao had made a courtesy visit to the Topu Honis shelter on August 29 last year that has been questioned by lawyers from JUS Juridico Social, the firm representing the victims.

The *Herald* and *The Age* could not contact Gusmao, with his close adviser Tomas Cabral and the media officer for his party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction, not returning calls or messages.



Xanana Gusmao, right, gives a fist bump to Daschbach, after a court hearing in Oecusse in February. *Credit:AP*

The court clerk in Oecusse, Julio Nunes, said Daschbach was supposed to travel there from Dili on Saturday, two days before the hearing was due to resume, after failing to appear last month. However, on Friday Nunes said he did think that would be the case now “because there is no plane” and he was unsure whether Daschbach was coming by ferry or whether he could appear by videoconference. Daschbach’s lead counsel, Pedro Aparicio, also did not return a call and text.

If and when the trial does go ahead before a three-judge panel, it will be before a closed court and Hamilton is eagerly awaiting the outcome from Australia.

He hopes to see Daschbach convicted and sentenced to the maximum of 20 years in prison, but that is just the start.

“I want the church and state to take responsibility for the children,” he said.

“To provide them with what Daschbach promised and never delivered on – a safe refuge. I want them to receive the psychological care they desperately need and I want them to receive a good education.

“Daschbach failed them and the church and state continue to fail them.”