

## International

# Inquiry finds 'massive' child sex abuse in French Catholic Church

## Vast majority of victims were pre-adolescent boys

PARIS: French Catholic clergy sexually abused some 216,000 minors in the seven decades since 1950, a "massive phenomenon" that was covered up for decades by a "veil of silence," an independent commission said yesterday. The commission's two-and-a-half-year investigation was prompted by outrage over a growing number of abuse claims and prosecutions against Church officials worldwide.

When claims against lay members of the Church such as teachers at Catholic schools are included, the number of child abuse victims climbs to 330,000 since 1950. "These figures are more than worrying, they are damning and in no way can remain without a response," commission chief Jean-Marc Sauve told a press conference. "Until the early 2000s, the Catholic Church showed a profound and even cruel indifference towards the victims." Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the Bishops' Conference of France (CEF), which co-requested the report, expressed his "shame and horror" at the findings.

"My wish today is to ask forgiveness from each of you," he told the news conference. Sauve denounced the "systemic character" of efforts to shield clergy from sex abuse claims and urged the Church to pay reparations even though

most cases are well beyond the statute of limitations for prosecution. The Church announced last spring a plan for "financial contributions" to victims to begin next year, and the commission's report included 45 recommendations for halting child abuse by clergy. "We expect clear and concrete responses by the Church," a collective of six victims' associations said.



### Decades by a 'veil of silence'

#### 'Deviant system'

The report, at nearly 2,500 pages, found that the "vast majority" of victims were pre-adolescent boys from a variety of social backgrounds. "The Catholic Church is, after the circle of family and friends, the environment that has the highest prevalence of sexual violence," the report said. Sauve had already told AFP on Sunday that a "minimum estimate" of 2,900 to 3,200 clergy members

had sexually abused children in the French Church since 1950. Yet only a handful of cases prompted disciplinary action under canonical law, let alone criminal prosecution. The commission began its work after Pope Francis vowed to address abuse by priests in May 2019, ordering people aware of cases to report them to Church officials.

In France in particular, the case of Philippe Barbarin, an archbishop initially convicted of not telling police of a priest's abuse of boy scouts, drew outrage after he was acquitted in January 2020. Francois Devaux, head of a victims' association, condemned a "deviant system" and called for a new "Vatican III" council to chart a way forward. "You have finally given an institutional recognition to victims of all the Church's responsibilities, something that bishops and the pope have not yet been prepared to do," Devaux said at the news conference.

#### 'Courage'

The victim estimates were largely based on a representative study carried out by France's INSERM health and medical research institute. Sauve and his team of 21 specialists, all unaffiliated with the Church, also interviewed hundreds of people who came forward to tell their stories. "If the veil of silence covering the



LYON: Lyon French Archbishop Olivier de Germary talks to journalists in Lyon archdiocese yesterday on the day of the publishing of a report by an independent commission into sexual abuse by church officials (Ciase). — AFP

acts committed has finally been torn away... we owe it to the courage of these victims," he wrote. The commission also had access to police files and Church archives, citing only two cases of refusals by Church institutions to turn over requested documents. Overall, it found that 2.5 percent of French clergy since

1950 had sexually abused minors, a ratio below the 4.4 to 7 percent uncovered by similar inquiries in other countries. While that would imply an unusually high number of victims per assailant, "a sexual predator can in fact have a high number of victims, especially those who attack boys," the report found. — AFP

## Chili peppers and hugs: What inspired Nobel Prize winners

WASHINGTON: David Julius was browsing a supermarket aisle filled with chili pepper sauces when he turned to his wife, a fellow scientist, and said he thought it was time he finally solved how certain chemicals cause the sensation of heat. "Well then, you should get on it," came her reply. Ardem Patapoutian, meanwhile, had long been driven to unlock the neglected mysteries of touch, which govern everything from how we discriminate between objects and how we feel when we hug another person, to how our bodies intuitively "know" where our limbs are, without looking.

Both American molecular biologists won the Nobel Medicine Prize for their groundbreaking advances, conducted independently of each other in the late 1990s and 2000s, that are now being turned towards developing treatments, especially of pain. Julius, of the University of California, San Francisco told reporters he had always been fascinated by how people interact with natural products in their environment, and by how certain plants contain chemical irritants, such as spice. Prior research had shown capsaicin was important as an activator of neurons involved in pain — but the underlying mechanism was unclear.

Julius discovered in 1997 the specific protein on the outer tip of sensory nerves responsible for the sensation of burning pain from chilies — and discovered it also responded to high temperatures. He then turned to compounds from menthol and mint to identify similar "receptors" responsible for cold, and used molecules from wasabi to learn about inflammatory pain. "I like doing experimental science because you get to work at the bench with your hands while you're also thinking, and that gives you an opportunity to really sort of enjoy what you're doing day to day, almost like a hobby," he said.

"There's a time when you make a discovery, where you're the only person on the planet, or at least you think you're the only person on the planet who knows the answer to a particular question, and that's a really thrilling moment." A number of drug candidates to stop chronic pain are in the pipeline, but have so far come up against challenging side effects. "You have to walk this line of wanting to inhibit pain that's chronic... but not eliminate pain sensation that's protective or acute," he said.

#### Immigrant success

Patapoutian, of Scripps Research, also made discoveries linked to temperature, but his investigations into pressure stood out even more. Specifically, he found two genes responsible for converting pressure into electrical signals through tests on lab-cultured cells. It was a painstaking progress arrived at by deleting one gene after another. "After working on this for a whole year and getting one negative result after another, the 72nd candidate ... wiped out this ability," he said at a press event. Armenian-origin Patapoutian, who grew up in war-torn Lebanon and came to the US aged 18, said it was hard for him to imagine the day would come he would win a Nobel. When the Nobel committee tried calling him at 2:00 am in California, his phone was on silent. — AFP

## President Biden goes on offensive against 'reckless' Republicans

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden went on the offensive Monday with a speech attacking Republicans over the looming threat of US debt default, while pressuring the Democratic Party to enact his stalled multi-trillion-dollar domestic spending agenda. Back from a rare weekend relaxing at home in Delaware, Biden plunged into the most consequential period of his presidency so far.

On one side, he faces Republican determination to cripple his momentum and recapture control of Congress in next year's midterm legislative elections. On the other, Biden is struggling with infighting between Democrats over his infrastructure and social spending bills. With the speech calling out Republicans and a trip to Michigan to promote his domestic spending plans, the 78-year-old political veteran hopes to regain the initiative.

While Biden's legacy may ultimately depend on the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package and potentially \$2 trillion or more for a social spending package, the entire US and global economies could face dire fallout from a US debt default. Biden on Monday called Republican opponents "reckless and dangerous" for refusing to join Democrats in raising the debt limit.

Republican obstruction could push "our economy

over a cliff," Biden said in a White House speech, warning he could not "guarantee" that a resolution would be found. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen says that from October 18, the United States will not have the funds to meet its obligations to creditors if Congress does not relax the legal debt ceiling. Congress has done this dozens of times over the decades since setting borrowing limits, and the votes are usually bipartisan and drama-free.

This year, reflecting the extraordinary acrimony in Washington, Republicans are refusing to vote for lifting the ceiling and vow even to block Democrats from passing a simple vote by themselves along party lines. Instead, Senate Republicans are attempting to force Democrats to use a complex maneuver called reconciliation to take sole responsibility for the debt hike. Democrats so far are refusing, accusing the Republicans of taking the nation's financial standing hostage.

On Monday, Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said a debt ceiling lift should be voted through "by the end of the week, period." "We do not have the luxury of waiting until October 18th, as it is our responsibility to re-assure the world that the United States meets our obligations in a timely fashion," Schumer said. But Republican Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, who wants to use the crisis to paint the Democrats as spendthrifts, said that by refusing the reconciliation avenue, Democrats were "sleepwalking toward yet another preventable crisis."

#### How much is enough?

The standoff means that Democrats, who control



DELAWARE: US President Joe Biden waves as he departs Brew Haha!, a coffee shop he ate at in Wilmington, Delaware after leaving church. — AFP

the Senate by only one vote, are bogged down in trying to manage the debt crisis while also trying to overcome internal differences over Biden's spending packages. Biden is trying to draw on every bit of experience from nearly four decades in the Senate and eight years as vice president under Barack Obama to find a formula that will unite the left and more conservative wings of his party. His trip to a trade union training facility in Howell, Michigan, will seek to highlight the White House's argument that the big spending plans are popular with voters and that Democrats would be committing colossal self-harm if their squabbling results in the entire legislative agenda collapsing. — AFP

## California rushes to contain oil spill as wildlife, beaches hit

LOS ANGELES: A huge oil spill was killing wildlife and threatening California's beaches on Monday, in what officials said amounted to an "environmental catastrophe." Birds and fish had begun washing up on the shore as a 126,000-gallon slick of crude oil choked waters south of Los Angeles, after spewing from a pipeline connected to an offshore rig. A 15-mile stretch of coastline was closed to the public and fishing was halted as crews scrambled to clean up one of California's biggest spills in decades.

Beaches could remain closed for weeks or even months, Huntington Beach Mayor Kim Carr warned. "Our wetlands are being degraded and portions of our coastline are completely covered in oil," she said. The US Coast Guard, which is coordinating the response, said oil amounting to less than three percent of the spill plume—estimated to be 5.8 nautical miles long—had been recovered, and

that more than a mile of oil containment booms had been deployed. "Unfortunately, we are starting to see oil covered fish and birds washing up along our coastline," including in protected wetlands, the City of Huntington Beach said Sunday.

Amplify Energy, the company that operates the pipeline, said Monday that "as a precautionary measure, all of the company's production and pipeline operations at the Beta Field have been shut down." CEO Martyn Willsher pledged the firm will do "whatever needs to be done" to take care of the spill, and said the company had significant insurance to cope with associated costs. Willsher said a remotely operated vehicle had located the probable source of the leak, and divers would be visiting the spot on Monday afternoon.

#### 'Just devastating'

Officials have warned people not



CALIFORNIA: Birds compete to eat a dead fish in the surf after an oil spill in the Pacific Ocean in Huntington Beach, California on October 4, 2021. — AFP

to touch or try to save any wildlife they find, but to instead call local authorities to alert them to animals affected by the oil. "This is just devastating for our marine life, our habitat, our economics, our entire community," Orange County Supervisor Katrina Foley said Sunday. "Our natu-

ral habitat we've spent decades building up and creating is just damaged in a day." The spill originated near the Elly platform, which was built in 1980 and is one of 23 oil and gas drilling platforms in federal waters off California, the Los Angeles Times reported. — AFP

## Cardinal on trial as financial scandal case resumes

VATICAN CITY: The trial of a once powerful Catholic cardinal and nine others resumes yesterday at the Vatican over alleged financial fraud and a disastrous London property deal paid for with charity funds. Cardinal Angelo Becciu, who served as the equivalent of chief of staff for Pope Francis at the time of the deal and was later fired from another post, is being tried alongside high-rolling London-based financiers and other Church employees.

They are accused of crimes including embezzlement, fraud and corruption relating to the Church's loss-making purchase of a luxury property in London's upscale Chelsea district. Becciu was at the time number two at the Secretariat of State, the most powerful department in the Vatican's central administration.

The case against the 73-year-old, which carries charges of embezzlement, abuse of office and witness tampering, also includes separate allegations over hundreds of thousands of euros of Church funds paid to his brother's charity. The trial is unprecedented in going before a Vatican tribunal of three lay magistrates rather than a religious court, after Francis changed the law to strip cardinals and bishops of legal privileges. Becciu, one of only two defendants who attended a preliminary hearing in

July in the temporary courtroom at the Vatican Museums, insists he will prove his innocence "with respect to every charge".

The trial, which is expected to last months, follows a two-year probe into how the Secretariat of State managed its vast asset portfolio and, in particular, who knew what about the disastrous 350-million-euro (now \$407-million) London investment. Since becoming pope in 2013, Francis has vowed to clean up the Church's finances. The scandal is particularly embarrassing because funds used for risky ventures like the London one came from the Peter's Pence, money donated by churchgoers for the pope's charities. Ahead of the trial, prosecutors painted a picture of risky investments with little or no oversight, and double-dealing by outside consultants and insiders trusted with the financial interests of the Secretariat of State. — AFP