

Arrest of Portugal's elite in paedophile scandal

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A scandal concerning the abuse of children in care homes has led to the arrest of several members of Portugal's social and political elite. The arrests include an ex-Portuguese ambassador, a TV games show host and the employment minister in the former Socialist Party government. A minister in the current Social Democratic Party/Peoples Party coalition government has also been implicated.

The government has used the scandal to attack the opposition and justify the widespread use of phone tapping, long periods of detention and other repressive measures.

The allegations are that state-run care homes were a target for wealthy and influential paedophiles whose activities were covered up for decades by successive Portuguese governments. Since the scandal erupted the Ministry of Labour and Social Security has confirmed that 128 girls and boys who were mainly deaf-mutes at the care homes were victims of sexual abuse.

Portugal's sexual abuse scandal has been compared to the Dutroux affair in Belgium [1]. *Diario de Noticias* has warned that if a paedophile "mafia network ... really exists, it is Portuguese democracy which is danger."

According to *Diario de Noticias*, Portugal is "reeling from a far-reaching crisis of values and identity." The author Antonio Mega Ferreira lamented in the weekly *Visão*, "I can't recall, during the past 25 years of democracy, ever having felt we were going through such a disturbing, frail, demoralising, upsetting time as we are going through now."

The scandal first made the headlines last November after dozens of children from Casa Pia care homes publicly accused Jorge Ritto, a former Portuguese ambassador to South Africa, of child abuse.

Casa Pia had the reputation as one of the oldest and most respected state institutions in Portugal. It was founded by Diogo Inácio de Pina Manique, Police Superintendent of Lisbon, following the social instability caused by the devastating earthquake of 1755. Casa Pia prided itself as "the very first establishment of popular education of the Country and the most significant institution of assistance to minors." The care homes currently accommodate 4,500 orphaned children.

Once the allegations became public Teresa Costa Macedo, a

former Secretary of State for the Family, revealed that she knew about them whilst she was a minister in the early 1980s and that very influential people were involved. In 1982, she claimed she told General Antonio Ramalho Eanes, Portuguese President from 1976-1986, about the allegations.

Following the arrest last November of Carlos Silvino, a former resident at a Casa Pia home who then became a driver and gardener for the institution, Costa Macedo warned that Silvino "was just one element in a huge paedophile network that involved important people in our country... It wasn't just him. He was a procurer of children for well-known people who range from diplomats and politicians to people linked to the media."

Justifying her silence about the allegations for over 20 years Costa Macedo said, "I received anonymous threats, by phone and post. They said they would kill me, flay me and a lot of other things."

Costa Macedo claims that whilst a minister she handed police "photographs, an account of the methods used to spirit children out of the orphanage and testimonies of a number of children." Press reports suggest many of the photographs were found at Jorge Ritto's house. It is also alleged that when investigators visited Ritto's house they found four children locked up who had been missing from Casa Pia for several days.

Ritto retired last year from his position as Portuguese representative to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation in Paris. The *Visão* magazine reported in March that Ritto was transferred from his job as consul in Stuttgart in 1970 after German officials complained about an incident with a young boy in a park. Ritto, who is now in police custody, has denied all the allegations of child abuse and accused the media of conducting a "lynching."

The Portuguese Attorney General's Office has since confirmed it began investigations into the Ritto affair in 1982, but abandoned them in 1987 for lack of evidence. Files relating to the case were destroyed in 1993.

After the paedophile allegations were first published, Prime Minister Jose Manuel Durao Barroso ordered an investigation. Jorge Sampaio, the President and a Socialist Party leader, proclaimed, "The impunity which for decades on end has made this case a shame for us all will finally end ... Faced with the

horror that so many children, who were entrusted to us to be educated and cared for, were victimised it is necessary to declare here that the guilty will be severely punished.”

He implored Portuguese citizens to trust the justice system saying, “We have to hope that our institutions work.”

However, a spokeswoman from Portugal’s Innocence in Danger charity said the organisation had been warning about child abuse for years in Portugal but there had been a virtual “media blackout”.

“It is no good President Sampaio and Parliament sounding off about the problem now and appearing to be knights in shining armour,” the spokeswoman continued. “They, like the police, must have known about the widespread abuse of children in Portuguese institutions for years. They have been warned often enough by charities such as ours but for reasons best known to themselves have remained silent. Their recent acts of breast-beating are outright hypocrisy... Time and time again complaint files are lost, witnesses are seldom interviewed and suspects let off the hook.”

Since Ritto’s arrest, the police have also detained the popular TV games show host Carloz Cruz, known as “Mr Television”, and Joao Diniz, a high society doctor. In April, they arrested Manuel Abrantes, a former assistant director of Casa Pia.

More controversially, in May, the police arrested Paulo Pedroso, Socialist Party MP and Labour and Training Minister from 1999 to 2001 with responsibility for the Casa Pia homes. Pedroso asked parliament to lift his parliamentary immunity so that police could question him about 15 cases of child sexual abuse that allegedly occurred whilst he was minister. Pedroso claims he is a victim of a witch-hunt saying, “I have never participated in any act of paedophilia or any similar act.”

The Socialist Party leader Eduardo Ferro Rodrigues, who is a close personal friend of Pedroso, also offered to undergo police questioning after “he had learned of plans to implicate him in the scandal”. The weekly paper *Expresso* published a report on May 25 from four children who said they saw Ferro Rodrigues at locations where sexual abuse was taking place. The paper said there was no evidence he was personally involved and the Attorney General José Souto de Moura insists he is not a suspect. Ferro Rodrigues says he will take legal action against those defaming him. “I want it to be clear: our fight will be serene but determined and it is and will only be directed at those who are responsible for this defamation, whatever their objective is.”

As a result of police tapping Pedroso’s mobile phone calls Luis Valente de Oliveira, public works minister in the current government, has also been questioned. Valente de Oliveira resigned in April citing health reasons.

When Durao Barroso came to power in March 2002, he promised to bring “life and honour” back to Portugal’s public institutions after a series of fraud cases. Valente de Oliveira’s association with the paedophile allegations following the embezzlement trial of Portuguese Defence Minister Paulo

Portas has made the promise worthless.

Whatever the truth of the child abuse allegations is, the government has used the Casa Pia scandal to justify the widespread tapping of phone calls by the police and the detention of suspects for up to 12 months without charge. There are nearly 300 pages of transcripts of tapped calls made by Socialist leaders, including Ferro Rodrigues. Under Portuguese law the police can tap anyone’s phone if they believe it will help solve a serious crime and providing they have special permission from a judge. The Attorney General said, “I myself could be [tapped] whether or not I was under suspicion, if the conversation would help discover the truth.”

Portugal is one of the poorest countries in Europe with the lowest wage rates and high employment. The country is officially in recession and is threatened by the lower costs offered by the eastward expansion of the European Union into the former Eastern bloc countries. Durao Barroso is pushing ahead with a programme of privatisation and social changes that are provoking widespread opposition. A General Strike on December 10 last year brought the country to a standstill. The strike was called in response to planned labour laws including curbing the right to strike, making dismissals easier, increasing the working week, reducing overtime payment and classifying holidays as a bonus. The use of phone taps, detention and other repressive measures will be vital to defeat any political rebellion against the government.

1] Marc Dutroux, a notorious paedophile and child murderer is still in jail awaiting trial years after his arrest in 1996. The Dutroux case, which uncovered a sordid picture of judicial and political corruption, implicated the highest levels of Belgian society. The general outrage with the political system this produced found its expression in a series of mass “white marches” (so-called because of the white ribbons participants wore in memory of Dutroux’s victims).



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