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Irish religious to pay more to abuse victims

Cian Molloy Catholic News Service | Jun. 4, 2009

DUBLIN, Ireland -- The 18 Irish religious orders implicated in decades of abuse of thousands of children in their care have agreed to increase their contribution to the compensation fund for victims.

Following a June 4 meeting with the Irish prime minister and other government ministers, the orders also agreed to an independent audit of their assets, so that their ability to pay further compensation can be determined.

In a joint statement following the meeting, initiated by Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowan, the orders said they were willing "to make financial and other contributions toward a broad range of measures, designed to alleviate the hurt caused to people who were abused in their care."

"The congregations will contribute toward a trust, proposed by (Cowan), and a process has now commenced to establish how this can be achieved," the statement said. "Each congregation is fully committed to identifying its resources, both financial and other, within a transparent process, with a view to delivering upon commitments made today.

"We agreed to commence this process immediately, and we have also agreed to meet the 'Taoiseach' (prime minister) again in two weeks' time," the statement said.

A report released May 20 by the Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse said a climate of fear created by pervasive, excessive and arbitrary punishment permeated most of Ireland's residential care institutions for children and all those run for boys from 1940 through the 1970s. These residential institutions, funded by the state but often run by Catholic religious orders, included schools, orphanages, hospitals, children's homes or any other institutions where children were in the care of nonfamily members.

Describing the meeting of the government and religious leaders as "very good," Minister for Education and Science Batt O'Keefe told RTE radio: "We are pleased that they have agreed with the three principles outlined by the government -- that a further substantial contribution will be made, agreement that a trust (to compensate and support victims) will be put in place and that the evaluation (of the congregations' assets) will be open and transparent."

All 18 congregations were represented at the meeting, which was also attended by O'Keefe; justice minister Dermot Ahern; social welfare minister Mary Hanafin; and Barry Andrews, minister for children and youth affairs.

The five government officials met June 3 with representatives from eight organizations representing survivors, who called on the government to ensure that the orders bore 50 percent of the cost of the compensation paid to victims.

Under the terms of a 2002 deal with the Irish government, the 18 religious congregations received indemnity from being sued by victims in exchange for contributing 128 million euros ($179 million) to a victims

compensation fund. That included 41.1 million euros in cash, 10 million euros for counseling services and 76.8 million euros from the transfer of real estate to the government.

Not only has the market value of the real estate fallen dramatically as a consequence of the global economic downturn, but much of the property identified has not been transferred to state ownership and is unlikely to be transferred any time soon. This is because in many cases the real estate is not owned by the religious orders themselves, but by trusts managed by the orders, or the properties have covenants attached limiting the purpose for which the real estate may be used.

Following publication of the report in May, it was learned that the total amount being paid in compensation to victims was 1.2 billion euros so that, until now, the religious orders were only paying about 10 percent of the total compensation package.

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