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Indian bishops draft 'zero tolerance' abuse policy

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CHENNAI, India -- Reacting to the Catholic church's spreading sex abuse scandal, bishops in India have drafted new guidelines that include a zero-tolerance policy for guilty priests.

The draft guidelines emerged from the Catholic Bishops Conference of India's meeting in Bangalore which ended April 28. The draft will be sent to the Vatican for approval before being finalized in June.

The bishops' meeting came amid revelations about a priest from India, the Rev. Joseph Palanivel Jeyapaul, who was charged in the United States with sexually assaulting a teenage female parishioner in Minnesota. Jeyapaul, who has since returned to India and is now working in the office of his home diocese, has offered to go back to the U.S. and face any charges there.

Critics of the Catholic church highlighted Jeyapaul's case as an example of what they said was the practice of protecting child-molesting priests from the law.

"While the general consensus at the conference was to report any suspected case of child sex abuse to the police, measures like defrocking and expulsion would be thought of only if the accused is convicted by a court," CBCI spokesperson Babu Joseph Karakombil told reporters.

Cardinal of Mumbai Oswald Gracias has said he favors immediately defrocking priests who admit guilt or are convicted by secular courts. "I am in favor of such stringent action against the guilty," he has said.

CBCI spokesperson Karakombil said the draft guidelines will be made public when they are finalized.

Karakombil recently told AKI, a Rome-based media service, that while some Indian priests have faced sex abuse charges in the United States, accusations in India are rare.

Child rights activists, however, say that a lack of disclosure about sex cases in India is a matter of grave concern. They hope the new guidelines will bring in more transparency and accountability.

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