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The Independent (London)

December 9, 2008 Tuesday
First Edition

Great and good await child sex verdict; * Prosecutor to conclude Portuguese trial involving state officials and celebrities

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SECTION: WORLD; Pg. 20

LENGTH: 515 words

Portugal's longest and most harrowing trial, over sex abuse in a state orphanage, enters its closing stages in Lisbon today as the prosecutor concludes his case against the seven accused.

Carlos Silvino, known as Bibi, a former driver and gardener at Lisbon's Casa Pia orphanage, has already admitted some 100 cases of sexual abuse against children, two counts of aggravated rape, as well as procuring minors for wealthy clients, a total of more than 600 crimes.

The prosecutor, Joao Aibeo, also accuses Portugal's former top TV presenter and media celebrity Carlos Cruz, and a high-society doctor who worked at Casa Pia, Joao Ferreira Diniz, of having sexually abused children.

The other defendants are Portugal's former ambassador to South Africa, Jorge Ritto; a lawyer, Hugo Marcial; Gertrudes Nunes, the owner of a country house in Elvas, south-east Portugal, where victims say they were forced into sex parties, and Casa Pia's former assistant director Manuel Abrantes.

The scandal broke in 2002 when the mother of a former inmate told a newspaper that orphanage staff had abused her son. Evidence quickly emerged that up to 100 children in state care had suffered decades of sexual abuse while senior politicians turned a blind eye.

Casa Pia, which dates from the 18th century, runs 10 Lisbon homes for 4,500 young people, mostly boys, who have no family or whose parents are too poor to care for them. Some are deaf and dumb. Former Casa Pia employees say that abuse dated from the mid-1970s, but the authorities did nothing.

The revelations plunged Portugal into a crisis of morbid self-questioning, and shattered public confidence in the country's political and legal system. Several senior politicians implicated in the alleged cover-up resigned. Adolescents spoke on television of being raped by adults they knew only as "Mr Engineer" or "Mr Doctor".

They said that Silvino offered them sweets and visits to football matches, then raped them in lavatories or dark corridors, and recruited them for sex parties with "important friends". When reporters challenged Silvino he told them: "They can't touch me. There are too many powerful people involved." That prompted suspicions of a high-level conspiracy. The trial began in 2004 after two years of investigations and has involved more than 500 sessions and

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hundreds of volumes of evidence, tapes and CDs from a total of 990 witnesses.

"It's a solemn moment for me and the victims who, at last, believe that the trial is going to end," says Catalina Pestana, who was appointed director of Casa Pia after the scandal broke in 2002. A year later, she said the orphanage was still suffering "the atmosphere of a horror movie".

Ms Pestana resigned in 2007 to represent 32 of the victims. "The men and women of justice have had time to reach a conclusion," she said recently.

After closing arguments for the prosecution, the three presiding judges will hear lawyers in the civil case, then those for the accused. The verdict is expected next February at the earliest. But 150 appeals have already been lodged, which could annul a final judgment.

LOAD-DATE: December 8, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

JOURNAL-CODE: IA

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