

Religious orders, Irish leader to discuss support for abuse victims

DUBLIN, Ireland - Representatives of the 18 religious orders implicated in the physical and sexual abuse of children in their care were scheduled to meet Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen June 3 to discuss ways to provide additional support and assistance to abuse survivors.

The same day, Cowen also will meet with groups representing victims who attended the government residential institutions between 1940 and the late 1970s.

The meetings follow recent public statements that the orders would not renegotiate a controversial 2002 deal in which they received indemnity from being sued by victims who attended the church-run institutions in exchange for contributing to a victims compensation fund.

Already, several of the religious orders have said that they plan to devote additional resources to compensating abuse victims. But none has expressed willingness to revisit the 2002 agreement under which the orders promised to donate 128 million euros (\$179 million) to a 1.18 billion euro government compensation fund for survivors.

Abuse survivor groups have said contributions to the compensation fund should be evenly split between the state - which put children into the care of the orders, then failed to adequately oversee that care - and the orders, which were responsible for the day-to-day management of the residential schools and orphanages.

On May 27 the Dail, the lower house of the Irish Parliament, unanimously passed a motion calling on the 18 religious congregations to make additional financial contributions to abuse victims.

Presentation Sister Elizabeth Maxwell, who chaired the Conference of Religious of Ireland in 2002 and helped negotiate the compensation agreement with the government, said on BBC Radio Ulster in late May that the settlement was "entered into in good faith."

She said had the congregations known in 2002 what they now know about the abuse of children in their care, the agreement would have been different.

“(It) may be inadequate in the light of new information that has come out in the Ryan report,” she said, referring to the report released May 20 by the independent Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse.

However, representatives of survivor groups said new information appeared in the report because investigators gained access to the Rome archives of the Christian Brothers, which ran many of the institutions named in the report.

Meanwhile, Dermot Ahern, Irish minister for justice, equality and law reform, has urged people who believe they suffered abuse in Catholic-run institutions to contact police; a special telephone line has been established to accept abuse allegations. Ahern acknowledged it would be difficult to prove offenses that occurred years ago, but said, “The more evidence provided, the greater the chances of securing convictions.”