

Portuguese president denies link to child abuse scandal

By Paul Mitchell
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Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio has appeared on television to criticise a newspaper that linked him to a paedophile scandal that has dominated the news in Portugal for the last year.

Sampaio denounced the “irresponsibility” of certain newspapers for reporting “the ill-considered leaks” originating from magistrates investigating the sexual abuse scandal at the Casa Pia children’s homes. Casa Pia is one of Portugal’s oldest and most respected public institutions and runs 10 homes caring for 4,500 children.

Sampaio continued, “It’s a crime that should be punished when the time is right. The head of state cannot legitimately let these offences pass.... They have the most serious consequences for the respect and consideration due the president of the republic.”

News reports appearing in the *Jornal de Noticias* claimed Sampaio and Portugal’s European Commissioner Antonio Vitorino were mentioned in anonymous letters sent to the magistrates investigating the Casa Pia scandal. A few days earlier, Portugal’s Attorney General José Souto Moura formally charged 10 people, including well-known politicians and celebrities, with organising a paedophile network, sexual abuse and rape of children at Casa Pia. No date for a trial has yet been decided.

The most high-profile person amongst those charged is Paulo Pedrosa, the MP and labour and training minister from 1999 to 2001 with responsibility for Casa Pia who is regarded as a future leader of the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party says the scandal is a plot and Pedrosa says he is the victim of a smear campaign and, along with the others accused, denies the charges.

Souto Moura also charged Jorge Ritto, a former Portuguese ambassador; Herman José, a comedian and talk show host; the popular TV games show host

Carloz Cruz, known as “Mr Television”; Joao Diniz, a high society doctor; and Manuel Abrantes, a former assistant director of Casa Pia.

The charges against these members of Portugal’s elite come after a year of investigations, 15,000 pages of evidence and the questioning of 600 witnesses. The case only saw the light of day after persistent campaigning by the abused children and their families led to reports appearing in the newspapers in November 2002.

In October 2003, Carlos Silvino, a former driver at Casa Pia, was charged with 35 counts of sexually abusing four children over a three-year period and last month charged with a further 662 counts of sexual abuse. Silvino is alleged to have organised the paedophile ring for over two decades, with many incidents apparently occurring at Ritto’s villa near Lisbon.

The Casa Pia scandal has been described as Portugal’s biggest political crisis since the overthrow of the military dictatorship in 1974. Not only have top politicians and celebrities been implicated in the paedophile ring, but the authorities apparently knew about it and covered it up for years. Reports first emerged in the 1980s, but police dropped their investigations and officials destroyed documents. The former secretary of state for families, Teresa Costa Macedo, said she received death threats after she notified the police.

The *Diario de Noticias* warned that if a paedophile “mafia network ... really exists, it is Portuguese democracy which is danger” and the author Antonio Mega Ferreira mourned, “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.”

Sampaio himself has called the Casa Pia scandal “a national disgrace” and urged the Portuguese people to keep their faith in the justice system, as has Prime Minister Jose Manuel Durao Barroso, saying, “The Portuguese people want justice to be done. So do I... As prime minister, I have complete confidence in the Portuguese legal system.”

Rui Fernandes, who sits on the national secretariat of the Portuguese Communist Party, insisted that “the idea of a crisis of the legal system is excessive.”

He accused Durao Barroso’s government of finding it “beneficial to develop this idea of crisis in order to justify deep reforms of the justice system,” including restrictions on “the independence of the judges or placing the Criminal Investigation Department under the direct control of the government.”

There is no doubt that the government has used the scandal to attack the opposition and justify the widespread use of phone tapping (there are nearly 300 pages of transcripts of tapped calls made by Socialist Party leaders, including its leader Ferro Rodrigues), long periods of detention without charge and other repressive measures. A whole debate on “limits on the freedom of the press” has also been opened up, with Durao Barroso saying that as long as journalists “are held to respect the law” the freedom of the press “is crowned and untouchable.”

However, the public anger over the scandal and the behaviour of Portugal’s ruling class expresses discontent with the political elite and with social conditions for which all the official parties, including the Communist Party, must take responsibility. Portugal is one of the poorest countries in Europe, with the lowest wage rates and high employment, and is threatened further by the lower costs offered by the eastward expansion of the European Union into the former Eastern bloc countries. The use of phone taps, detention and other repressive measures will be vital to defeat any political rebellion against the government.

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