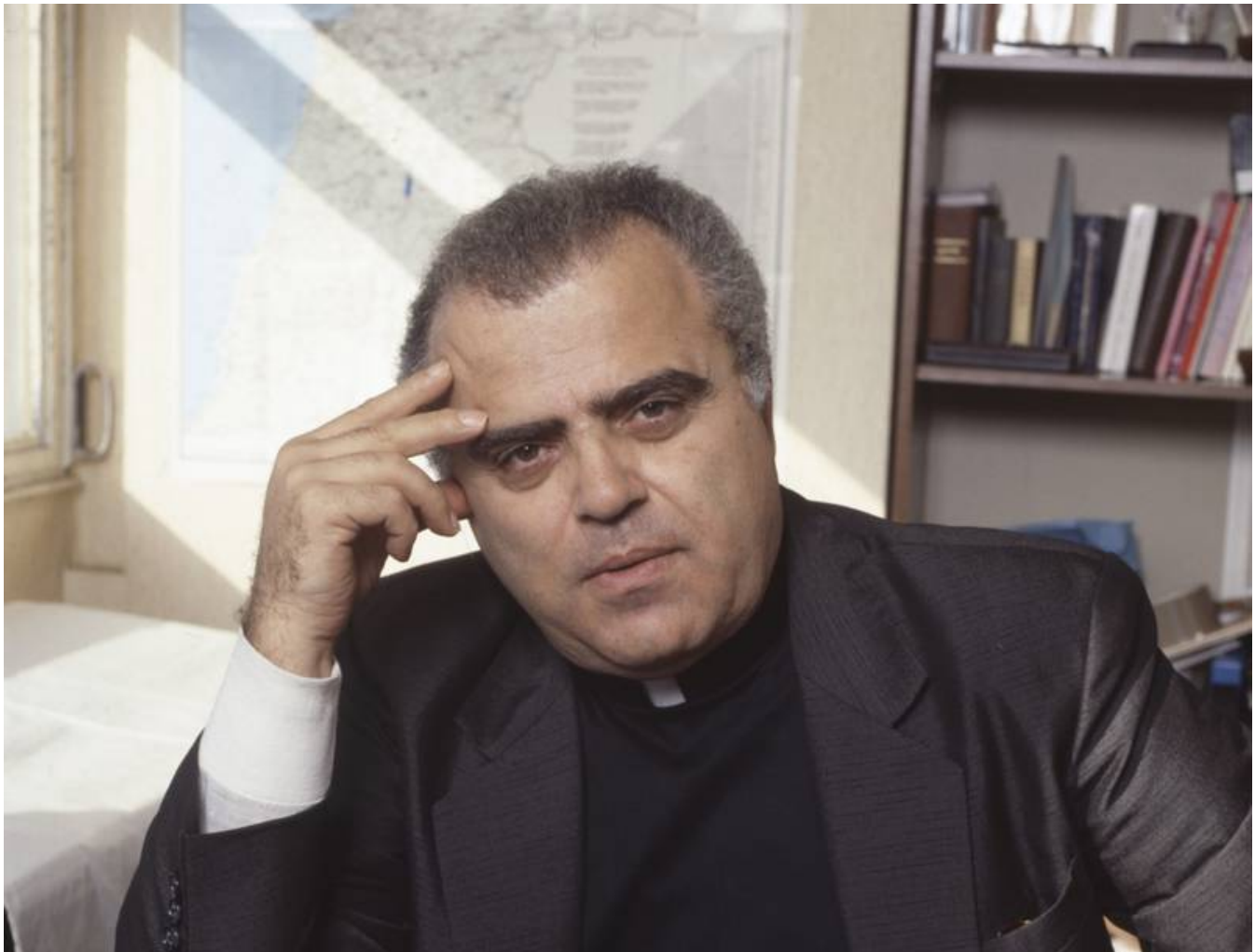


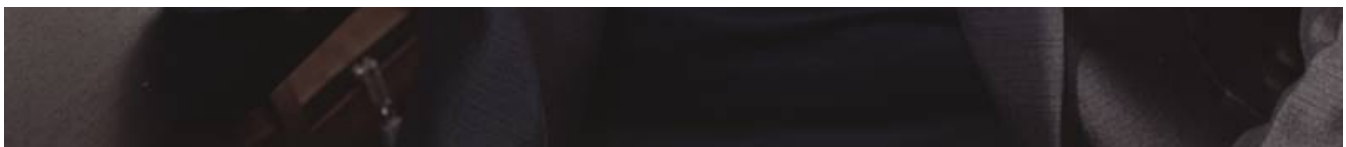
Lebanese priest convicted of child rape in France still 'a public danger'

► Mansour Labaky has received support from well-known media and religious figures in Lebanon



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MENA



Mansour Labaky was convicted this week of the rape and sexual assault of three children. Photo circa 1990 via Getty Images



Aya Iskandarani
Beirut
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Celeste Akiki travelled all the way from the US to France this week to testify in a case that has haunted her for more than 40 years.

She is the niece of Mansour Labaky, a charismatic [Lebanese](#) priest who was sentenced to 15 years in prison by a French court in Caen, Normandy, on Monday for the rape and sexual assault of three children who were under his care in an orphanage in the 1990s. Lawyers for the plaintiffs, however, believe there are at least 50 other victims of abuse in France.

The 58-year-old woman told *The National* she was abused by her uncle at the onset of Lebanon's civil war in the 1970s, when she was only 14 and had just lost her father. For her, Monday's conviction meant she could finally turn the page on decades of trauma.

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"When I heard the sentence, I finally felt relief," she said over the phone from Caen. "I was a victim of rape and incest, so for me distance was just a detail. I had to be there."

While the verdict provided relief for victims after an eight-year trial, experts say the paedophile priest is still a danger to children in Lebanon, where he enjoys complete freedom with the establishment's support.

"I testified hoping that this can help other victims because I've been through this hell. I don't want them to feel as lonely, as desperate as I felt at the time," she said.

Labaky, 81, had already been condemned by the Vatican in 2012 for sexually abusing three children and taking advantage of confession to solicit victims.

In the 1990s he opened an orphanage in rural Normandy for Lebanese and French pupils. He abused his victims while they were in his care at Notre-Dame – Enfants du Liban.

The Maronite priest is a famous religious personality within Lebanon's Christian community. Many worshippers grew up listening to his hymns and hearing about his benevolent work, so much so that Ms Akiki said she felt no one would believe her if she spoke up at the time.

"In Lebanon, he was put on a pedestal," she said.

Friends in high places

Labaky denies wrongdoing and his supporters claim there is a conspiracy against him. He has received support from well-known media and religious figures in Lebanon, even after Interpol issued an international arrest warrant for him in 2016.

Pro-Hezbollah newspaper *Al Akhbar* published an opinion piece on Wednesday defending Labaky, who they say is "drowning in pain, disease, old age and the hymns he continued to work on".

Ms Akiki said her uncle "has friendships among religious officials. I think sometimes people put friendships before the general interest".



Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al Rai has previously voiced support for Labaky. Reuters

The head of Lebanon's Maronite church, Patriarch Bechara Al Rai, had expressed support for him in 2016, but later issued a retraction.

The Maronite Patriarchy declined to comment on Labaky's conviction this week.

Child protection specialist Elissa Hasrouny, who works for Plan International, said that the Lebanese government's lack of response is sending the wrong message to victims of such abuse in the country.

Despite his age and that he is allegedly living as a recluse in a convent, Ms Hasrouny said that as long as there is no legal or police action against Labaky in Lebanon, there will always be a risk that he may commit these crimes again.

"We call on the state to take concrete actions to protect victims of sexual abuse and violence," she told *The National*.

"We are trying to tell victims to speak out and that they will be heard if they do but the authorities' lack of response says: if you are powerful and you do this we will protect you from justice."

Innocence lost

For Ms Akiki, the sentence "does not replace the years we lost – the innocence of our childhood – but it confirms that the victims did nothing wrong".

"We are not guilty like Mansour Labaky claims. He was saying that we lied, that he was innocent," she said.

Lawyer Solange Doumic, who represented the victims, said Labaky's religious aura helped him lure his victims and gain support from his community in Lebanon.

She said France has asked for Labaky's extradition. Lebanon does not have an extradition treaty with France and does not typically extradite its citizens. Lebanon's Internal Security Forces did not respond to a request for comment on the case.

Ms Doumic said the thought that Labaky was free to commit more crimes in Lebanon throughout the eight years of his trial "horrified" her.

"I would tell the judge: do you realise, during all this time he must be raping children in Lebanon?" she told *The National*.

The same fear haunted the victims who testified against him, she said. "They came to France, sometimes from far away, to testify against him so that he can't do this anymore."

Labaky cannot appeal his verdict because he was absent during his trial. He can only ask for a retrial if he returns to France, where he would be taken to jail on arrival.

"For me, it is obvious that the Lebanese judiciary should prosecute him," she said. Nothing prevents him from committing further offences in Lebanon today, she said.

Ms Doumic said she believes more than 50 girls and young women were among Labaky's victims in France. She believes the number in Lebanon is much higher.

Labaky's youngest victim was 7 when he abused her, she said, and the oldest one was in her 50s.

"That man is a public danger," she said.

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