

Dutroux insists he was part of paedophile ring

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Marc Dutroux insisted yesterday that he was not a "lone predator" who kidnapped and raped young girls but part of a wider paedophile ring.

Dutroux, a convicted child rapist and drug dealer, is charged with three co-defendants, including his former wife, Michelle Martin, with kidnapping and raping six girls and killing four of them.

Speaking as his trial drew to a close, he expressed his "sincere regret" but did not ask forgiveness from the victims' families. Flanked by armed guards and standing behind a bulletproof glass screen, he told the crowded courthouse in Arlon in southern Belgium: "I am not a murderer."

Julie Lejeune and Melissa Russo, eight, were abducted as they played near their homes on the outskirts of Liege and starved to death in a tiny cell Dutroux built in the basement of his terraced house near Charleroi. Their emaciated bodies were found buried in his garden.

Yesterday he blamed his ex-wife for failing to feed them while he was serving a prison sentence for car theft.

Two older girls - Eefje Lam brecks, 19, and An Marchal, 17 - were kidnapped in Flanders and killed in 1996. They were buried alive and their corpses unearthed along with the body of Dutroux's associate, Bernard Weinstein. He denied murdering all three of them.

Prosecutors accuse Dutroux, 47, of leading his own band of abductors rather than being the pawn of a well-connected crime ring whose existence has been widely rumoured but never proved. If convicted, he faces life imprisonment.

He insisted he had neither kidnapped nor raped the eight-year-olds but said he was responsible for all four who died because he "did not protect them enough".

"It is important for me to make this clear to the parents, even if it doesn't have any effect on what punishment I receive," he told the court.

He admitted raping two other girls, Sabine Dardenne and Laetitia Delhez, 12 and 14 when he abducted them in 1996, and who have both given electrifying testimony.

Dutroux, who has a reputation for being manipulative, spoke of his unloving parents and his regrets at not being a good father to his three children. He claimed there had been a cover-up during the investigation, blaming his co-defendant, the Brussels businessman Michel Nihoul, for masterminding the kidnappings. Nihoul has denied this.

Dutroux portrayed himself as a victim, a "puppet in a show trial" who had to be put away to "hide the truth" and serve the interests of "organised corruption".

Only 10% of the case had been examined, he said, asking why independent-minded policemen had been removed from the investigating team. He urged police to follow up clues he said would prove he was working for a network which kidnapped girls to be sold into prostitution.

But Judge Stephane Goux said this week he saw no grounds for reopening files. Dutroux also attacked psychiatric experts who testified that he was a psychopath and compared him to the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann.

The 12 jurors will be sequestered in an army barracks during their deliberations, which are expected to produce a verdict next week.

Many Belgians seem resigned to the fact that much about this story may never be known. "I think we will never have the truth," said Raymond Lejeune, Julie's grandfather.