

Judge tells of murder plots to block Dutroux investigation

◆ telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belgium/1456107/Judge-tells-of-murder-plots-to-block-Dutroux-investigation.html

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March 5, 2004

The Belgian judge who saved two young girls from Marc Dutroux's paedophile dungeon broke down in the witness box yesterday, alleging high-level murder plots to stop his investigation into a child-sex mafia.



Jean-Marc Connerotte

Jean-Marc Connerotte choked in tears on the fourth day of the trial, describing the bullet-proof vehicles and armed guards needed to protect him against shadowy figures determined to stop the full truth coming out.

"Never before in Belgium has an investigating judge at the service of the king been subjected to such pressure," he said.

"We were told by police that [murder] contracts had been taken out against the magistrates. As the danger mounted, emergency measures were taken."

He then froze in silence and the court was adjourned until he recovered.

He alleged that "organised crime methods" were used to discredit his work and ensure that his investigation ended in "judicial failure".

A hero to millions of Belgians, Judge Connerotte was stripped of the Dutroux case after he had dinner with families of the victims in October 1996, which was deemed a conflict of interest.

The move resulted in workers going on strike and 300,000 people marching silently through Brussels in mass protest.

Seven years later, some of the families are boycotting the trial, describing it as a "circus" and saying that the inquiry effectively shut down the moment Judge Connerotte departed.

Addressing the jury of 12 at the Arlon Palais de Justice yesterday, Judge Connerotte relived the moment in August 1996 when his team rescued the two girls, Sabine Dardenne, 12, and Laetitia Delhez, 14, from the cage beneath Dutroux's house in the slums of Charleroi.

He said the girls recoiled back into the cell when the 450lb hidden door was pulled open, fearing that the paedophile "band" had come to get them.

As Dutroux coaxed them out, saying there was nothing to fear, they clutched on to him as their protector.

"They thanked and embraced him, which is truly disgusting," Judge Connerotte said. "That shows how far they had been conditioned. It was Macchiavellian."

Sabine had been seized as she cycled to school, then smuggled to Charleroi in the boot of a car and held for 79 days, much of the time chained by the neck.

Dutroux admitted this week that he had raped her 20 times but he denies that he is a paedophile.

He said the plan was to hand her over as a "consignment" to the criminal network but he kept her because he was "depressed" and wanted to "expand his family". Judge Connerotte said Dutroux had displayed a "frightening professionalism" in designing the secret cells: "Clearly they were built so they couldn't be found," he said.

"He had installed a ventilation system so that the odours were extracted from above. The dogs couldn't smell the presence of the young girls."

Even so, he castigated the Charleroi authorities for failing to take action much earlier. Dutroux had been named in police files in July 1995 as a suspect in the abduction of two eight-year-old girls - Julie Lejeune and Melissa Russo - more than a year before their bodies were found on Dutroux's land.

"The file talks of seizure of children, foreign trafficking, and perhaps even of cells, if I remember well," Judge Connerotte said.

"The sum of 150,000 francs [£2,500] was mentioned as the price for girls. I was struck by the richness of these documents. Any magistrate should have acted the way I did later."

While Dutroux's house was searched five months after the tip-off, it appears to have been a perfunctory visit. Nothing was found.

The girls apparently starved to death in the dungeon while Dutroux was in prison for 106 days.

"A medical expert told me an adult can last a maximum of 60 days," the judge said. "Until we find out how Julie and Melissa actually died, we are not going to solve this case."

Dutroux testified this week that the girls were already dead when he returned from prison, contradicting his earlier statements.

He said matter-of-factly that he put the bodies in the freezer for a week to get them out of the way. His wife insisted that they were still alive when he came back. In January 1996 Judge Connerotte wrote to King Albert alleging that his investigations into crime networks were being blocked because suspects "apparently enjoyed serious protection".

He went on to say that the "dysfunctional judiciary" was breaking down as mafia groups took secret control of the "key institutions of the country".

His enemies fought back after he was pulled off the case. He was formally accused, along with two key detectives, of manipulating testimony, forgery, and illegal leaks.

The inquiries took up three years, drawing off police energy while the main Dutroux case languished. In the end, the three were cleared of all charges. "You would have thought that the Dutroux dossier was so serious that investigators would do everything in their power to discover the truth," Judge Connerotte said.

"But exactly the opposite happened. Rarely has so much energy been spent opposing an inquiry."