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Nuns and priests accused of abuse

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ALLEGATIONS of sexual abuse by nuns and priests at a former Rockhampton children's orphanage had been received by a State Government hotline, Families Youth and Community Care Minister Kev Lingard said yesterday.

Mr Lingard told Parliament the Sisters of Mercy ran a children's orphanage at Neerkol in central Queensland until 15 years ago.

"Residents of Neerkol included migrant children from England and children whose parents paid for them to receive their education whilst boarding at Neerkol, as well as some children in the care of the State," Mr Lingard said.

"To date, six calls have been received from these former residents on the child sexual abuse hotline within my department.

"Further allegations continue to be received about abuse to both male and female children.

"Callers to the hotline allege a pattern of incidents of physical and in some cases sexual abuse by the priests and nuns at the orphanage."

He said that in all but one case, the alleged perpetrators were now dead.

"Upon their receipt, the allegations against the living person were referred to the Queensland Police Service, which is conducting appropriate investigations," he said.

"All callers to the hotline reporting abuse have individually requested that there be an inquiry into Neerkol.

"Following the completion of the present investigation, I will refer all matters to the Children's Commissioner when the position is created."

Rockhampton Sisters of Mercy congregational leader Sister Berneice Loch said the orphanage had been home to about 180 children, most of whom were wards of the state.

Sister Berneice said it was the first time she had been advised of these allegations but there had been complaints in the past, none of which went to court.

She said she was unaware of was a police investigation into any allegations, and that it was "difficult" to have a trial by media.

"I certainly will look carefully and honestly at any allegations which are

brought to our attention," Sister Berneice said.

"There are certainly a handful of (past) complaints but they have not necessarily been substantiated."

The allegations come after the Catholic Church has begun investigating a Brisbane priest over long-standing rumours involving him in the sexual abuse of boys.

The investigation by former Banyo seminary rector Frank Lourigan was launched last month after a woman at Mass in a Brisbane parish told the congregation of a priest she alleged was a paedophile.

Archbishop John Bathersby has conceded that the church has made mistakes in the past in dealing with allegations of paedophilia.

He has told The Courier-Mail that another review of the diocese's abuse protocol is under way.

Archbishop Bathersby said paedophilia in the Church was totally unacceptable.

"To lead innocents astray has got to be one of the most horrible of crimes," he said.

One man has claimed the accused priest now under investigation sexually mistreated him when the man was an altar boy.