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Attorneys press for sex-abuse trials

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By Greg Moran
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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A lawyer for dozens of plaintiffs in sexual-abuse lawsuits filed against the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego yesterday said cases will begin going to trial if the latest round of talks on a settlement does not succeed.

The development comes two years after nearly 100 lawsuits alleging sexual abuse at the hands of Catholic clergy were combined to work out a settlement.

At a news conference outside the Pastoral Center of the diocese, lawyer Irwin Zalkin expressed some guarded hope that a settlement could be reached. Zalkin, whose firm represents 35 of the 144 people who have sued the diocese, said the appointment of a new settlement judge and a meeting this week added urgency to the stalled talks.

He said lawyers for the plaintiffs, the diocese and its insurance carrier – a critical player in any potential settlement – met in a confidential session Tuesday with Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Anthony Mohr.

Mohr is assigned to the Complex Litigation Department of the Los Angeles court, where all the clergy abuse cases from the Southern California dioceses have been coordinated in the hopes of getting a

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settlement.

"I think we have a judge who is trying to push people together," Zalkin said after the news conference. "I think he made it very clear that if there is not going to be a resolution in the very near term, then cases are going to start heading to trial."

A spokesman for the diocese, Rodrigo Valdivia, said the confidentiality rules governing the settlement talks prohibited the diocese from extensive comment.

"We are involved in settlement discussions," he said. "And the judge has limited us from making any statements on the proceedings."

There has been growing frustration among the lawyers and clients who are suing the diocese because they have seen some movement in other cases around the state. Lawyers here want to increase the pressure on the diocese to settle before going to a trial, where details of the alleged incidents would come out.

"We're getting down to the beef," Zalkin said. "There will be either a quick resolution or a public airing in court."

In Orange County, the diocese settled all of the 100 cases they were facing for \$100 million earlier this year. Several cases have gone to trial in Northern California, yielding awards of \$180,000 to \$1.5 million.

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