

# *Mixed-Race Women Sue Belgium for Crimes Against Humanity*

By The Associated Press

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BRUSSELS — Five mixed-race women born in Congo when the country was under Belgian rule who were taken away from their Black mothers have filed a lawsuit for crimes against humanity targeting the Belgian state.

With their claim, they hope Belgium will finally recognize its responsibility in the suffering endured by the thousands of mixed-race children, known as “métis,” who were snatched away from families and placed in religious institutions and homes.

“This systematic policy of racially motivated abduction is a crime against humanity,” Michele Hirsch, a lawyer for the women, told The Associated Press on Friday. “It is not enough to say: ‘We apologize.’ Reality has to be taken into account. Their lives have been shattered.”

Last year, Belgium’s then-prime minister, Charles Michel, apologised to the métis children who were kidnapped toward the end of the colonization period in the 1940s and 1950s.

The five women, all born between 1945 and 1950, filed their lawsuit as the Democratic Republic of Congo prepares to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the country’s independence amid growing demands that Belgium reassess its colonial past. In the wake of the protests against racial inequality in the United States, several statues of King Leopold II, who is blamed for the deaths of millions of Africans during Belgium’s colonial rule, have been sprayed with paint, while a petition called for the country to remove all statues of the former king.

Hirsch said the five women — four who now live in Belgium and one in France — were aged between 2 and 4 when they were taken away at the request of the Belgian colonial administration, in cooperation with the local Catholic church authorities.

“Their fathers were white and did not legally recognize their child,” Hirsch said.

According to the legal documents, in all five cases the fathers did not exercise parental authority and the Belgian administration threatened the children’s Congolese families with reprisals if they refused to let them go.

The children were placed at a religious mission in Katende, in the province of Kasai, with the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul. There, they lived with some 20 other mixed-race girls and Indigenous orphans in very hard conditions.

“They arrived without clothes or shoes, having lost all their affective bonds,” Hirsch said. “Some children were allowed to go to school, but they also needed to work.”

According to the lawyer, the Belgian state’s strategy aimed at preventing interracial unions and isolating métis children, known as the “children of shame,” to make sure they would not claim a link with Belgium later in their lives.

After independence, the legal documents claim that the children were left abandoned by both the State and the Church, and that some of them were sexually molested by militia fighters.

The women have requested compensation of 50,000 euros each.

“This is not for the money,” Hirsch said. “We want a law that can apply to all so that the Belgian State recognizes the crimes committed and the suffering endured by métis children.”