20-year term sought for husband in French mass rape trial

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Gisele Pelicot carries flowers as she leaves the Avignon courthouse surrounded by the media after attending the trial of her former partner Dominique Pelicot accused of drugging her for nearly ten years and inviting strangers to rape her at their home in Mazan, a small town in the south of France, in Avignon, southern France, on November 25, 2024. - French prosectors said on November 25, 2024, they were seeking the maximum 20-year jail term for the man charged with enlisting dozens of strangers to rape his heavily-sedated wife, in a trial that has shaken France. (Photo by Christophe SIMON / AFP)  
  
French prosecutors on Monday demanded a maximum 20-year jail term for the man charged with enlisting dozens of strangers to rape his wife while she was drugged and unconscious, expressing hope the trial will help change “the relations between men and women”.  
  
Dominique Pelicot has been on trial in the southern city of Avignon since September with 49 other men for organising the rapes and sexual abuse of Gisele Pelicot, now his former wife. One man is being tried in absentia.  
  
The case has sparked horror, protests and a debate about male violence in France. On Saturday, tens of thousands of protesters staged new demonstrations across the country against violence targeting women.  
  
A prosecutor told the court on Monday that the trial should herald a fundamental change in society.  
  
“Twenty years is a lot because it is 20 years of a life,” prosecutor Laure Chabaud said in calling for the sentence.  
  
“But it is both a lot and too little. Too little in view of the seriousness of the acts that were committed and repeated.”  
  
Gisele Pelicot said it was “a very emotional moment”.  
  
Dominique Pelicot has admitted all charges against him. The 71-year-old plied his wife with anti-anxiety drugs from 2011 to 2020 at their home in the village of Mazan, then strangers he recruited online raped and abused her.  
  
He documented the crimes in photos and videos discovered by police after being caught filming up women’s skirts in public.  
  
– ‘Before and after’ –  
  
Prime Minister Michel Barnier called the trial a turning point for the country’s efforts to combat violence against women.  
  
“I’m convinced that the Mazan trial will mark a before and after,” Barnier said, marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.  
  
“This trial is shaking up our society, in our relationship with each other, in the most intimate relationships between human beings,” said Jean-Francois Mayet, the other prosecutor.  
  
What is at stake, he added, “is not a conviction or an acquittal” but “to fundamentally change the relations between men and women”.  
  
Many of the accused argued in court that they believed Dominique Pelicot’s claim that they were participating in a libertine fantasy, in which his wife had consented to sexual contact and was only pretending to be asleep.  
  
Among them, 33 have also claimed they were not in their right minds when they abused or raped Gisele Pelicot, a defence not backed by any of the psychological reports compiled by court-appointed experts.  
  
“In 2024, we can no longer say: ‘Since she said nothing, she agreed’,” said Chabaud. “The absence of consent could not be ignored by the defendants.”  
  
Sentencing requests were slated to take three days.  
  
Most of the defendants, including Dominique Pelicot, are charged with aggravated rape.  
  
Dominique Pelicot, who said he wanted to “subjugate a disobedient woman”, was “devastated” by the sentencing request, said his lawyer Beatrice Zavarro.  
  
– ‘Shame changes sides’ –  
  
Prosecutors requested a 17-year prison sentence for one defendant, Jean-Pierre M., 63, who applied Dominique Pelicot’s practices against his own wife to rape her a dozen times, sometimes in the presence of Pelicot.  
  
Prosecutors demanded 10-year prison sentences for 11 co-defendants; 11 years’ imprisonment for two co-defendants, and 12-years’ imprisonment for another four.  
  
Prosecutors also demanded that one man be jailed for 13 years, while four years’ imprisonment was requested for Joseph C., 69, the only one of the defendants not to be prosecuted for rape or attempted aggravated rape.  
  
Some defence lawyers have described the sentencing demands as “staggering” and “out of proportion”, claiming the public prosecutor’s office was under pressure from “public opinion”.  
  
“I fear what will happen next,” said Louis-Alain Lemaire, a lawyer for four of the defendants.  
  
The trial has made Gisele Pelicot, who insisted the hearings be held in public, a feminist icon in the fight of women against sexual abuse.  
  
Prosecutor Mayet praised her “courage” and “dignity”.  
  
She was the victim of some 200 rapes, half of which were attributed to her ex-husband.  
  
Mayet thanked her for allowing the hearings to be held in public and allowing some of the approximately 20,000 photos and videos taken without her knowledge by Dominique Pelicot to be shown.  
  
“You were right, madam: the past few weeks have shown the importance of showing this, so that shame changes sides,” he added.  
  
The verdicts and sentencing are expected by December 20.  
  
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