

# **PHILIPPINES: A Catholic priest and his staff held hostage by an ISIS-inspired group**

ACN (24.05.2017) – A Catholic priest and his staff are reportedly being held hostage by ISIS-inspired lawless elements that have occupied a number of facilities and public buildings in the Islamic city of Marawi, Central Mindanao, Philippines.

Archbishop Socrates Villegas, President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines as well as ACN Philippines, has called on the Catholic faithful to pray for the safety of Fr. Chito Suganob, MSP and his staff who were taking refuge at the Cathedral of St. Mary's. The Cathedral has reportedly been taken over and set on fire last night by the Muslim extremists according to news received by Philippine news agencies Rappler.com, Zamboanga News and Radio Mindanao Network.

"Members of the Maute fighting group have threatened to kill the hostages if the government forces unleashed against them are not recalled. As government forces ensure that the law is upheld, we beg of them to make the safety of the hostages a primordial consideration," said Archbishop Villegas in a public Facebook post.

The attack on Marawi started on the afternoon of May 23 when the Philippine military launched an operation against "high value targets" belonging to the Abu Sayyaf and Maute terrorist groups in a commercial and residential area in Marawi.

In retaliation, around 100-200 armed men, assisted by local sympathizers, occupied the Amai Pakpak Medical Center in

Marawi City. An hour later, the terrorist group occupied the Marawi City Jail and allegedly set the facility on fire. Photographs of black ISIS flags hoisted by the terrorists in different parts of the city spread online.

Later in the evening, Philippine media reported that two other fires broke out in Dansalan College and Saint Mary's Cathedral. The news agencies also mentioned in their reports that the armed men have laid siege of the city's firetrucks thus preventing authorities from putting out the fires.

Despite the reports, the Philippine government, through its Armed Forces, claims the situation is fully under control and has urged Filipinos to refrain from sowing panic by sharing unverified accounts of the ongoing crisis. The military has also denied the claim that ISIS has reached the country. The President declared Martial Law last night in the entirety of Mindanao.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Villegas pointed out in his statement that the incident should be a cause for solidarity among Filipino Muslims and Christians: "We are fully aware that most Muslims are peace-loving. We call on all Catholics to pray with our Muslim brothers and sisters. We call on the occupiers who claim to worship the same God that we all do not defile His name by bloodshed. Peace be upon us all," added Archbishop Villegas in a statement.

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