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Kidnapped Philippines priest pleads: 'Please consider us!'

World Watch Monitor (31.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qDxIqT> - As the battle for the southern Philippines city of Marawi continues, a priest being held hostage by Islamist militants has appeared in a video, pleading for the President to "consider" hostages' lives and stop bombing the city.

A spokesman for the Philippines army dismissed the video, which was released yesterday (30 May) and circulated via social media, as "propaganda".

Fr. Teresito Sukanob says in the video he is one of around 200 people being held hostage by the Islamists who stormed the city last week, setting fire to buildings including a cathedral and Christian college. The militants later killed nine Christians at a checkpoint; local residents identified them as Christians and said they had been pulled from a truck, had their hands bound and then their bodies riddled with bullets and left in a field.

Reports continue to emerge of Christians being specifically targeted, forced to recite Muslim prayers and used as human shields. Edwin de la Peña, bishop of Marawi, told Catholic news agency Fides he was "happy" Fr. Sukanob was alive but "afraid of the fate of the hostages – about 200 civilians in all – now used as human shields".

Yet there have also been reports of acts of solidarity from Muslims towards Christians, with Muslims reportedly giving Christians hijabs, hiding them in their homes and teaching them Muslim prayers.

The Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches called on its members "not to view the actions of the Maute Group as normative to Islam".

"The ongoing peace talks of the Government with our Muslim brothers and sisters exemplify that there abound peace-loving adherents of the Islamic faith," the Council added. "We appeal to the Maute Group to engage in peaceful dialogue, instead of using violent means. We also appeal to them as fellow human beings and citizens of this nation to immediately release all hostages unharmed, which include the parish priest Fr. Teresito 'Chito' Sukanob."

Although the Philippines is a majority-Christian country, the region of Mindanao, where Marawi is situated, has a strong Muslim presence and has long been home to violent Islamist groups seeking to create an independent Islamic state. Mindanao's governor said the militants in Marawi are from three groups – Maute, Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters.

Over 100 people have been killed since the Islamists entered the city on 23 May, while, according to some reports, as many as half the city's 200,000 inhabitants have fled.

"This is different from the Zamboanga Siege in 2013," a local source explained. "That was a case of militant group Moro National Liberation Front wanting to make themselves known to the government, saying 'We're here!' This time, the Maute Group, or ISIS – we can use

the name interchangeably now – they’re attacking with the intention to occupy. Marawi is strategic. It’s central to Mindanao. If ISIS succeeds in making Marawi a caliphate, they can easily spread to other provinces.”

The source added that the locals, “though they’re used to explosions in the south, this is the first time they’ve experienced an armed conflict where they needed to evacuate. One Christian student [who fled the city’s university] says they’re traumatised by what’s happening. Merely the sound of a truck gives them jitters”.

“We are really in pain,” Bishop de la Peña told Fides. “We do not know what the army will do and how the terrorists will react. We have asked for the help of Muslim leaders in Marawi, our friends, while the whole Catholic population is gathered in prayer throughout the country.”

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.

Churches ablaze, martial law declared in Mindanao

Priest feared kidnapped, presidential order after terror group attack branded a gross 'over-reaction'

By Joe Torres

UCA News (24.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qiPLIm> - A Catholic priest was feared kidnapped and Christian churches set on fire in the restive Philippine region of Mindanao as President Rodrigo Duterte imposed martial law across the entire Muslim majority region last night.

The move has already drawn flak as being an over reaction from many quarters, including church leaders.

Duterte declared martial law after a group linked with the so-called Islamic State attacked a major city.

The president placed all of Mindanao's 27 provinces and 33 cities, roughly a third of the country, under martial law for a period of 60 days.

Mindanao is home to an estimated 20 million people.

The martial law announcement came after dozens of fighters from the Maute terror group entered Marawi, a predominantly Muslim city of about 200,000 people, earlier on May 23.

The group, which has vowed allegiance to the Islamic State and has been clashing with security forces in recent months, took over a hospital, a Catholic cathedral, and a Christian school.

A hospital, the city's jail, and several other establishments were also taken over by the gunmen.

Initial reports received by ucanews.com said Father Teresito Suganob, vicar-general of the Prelature of Marawi, and several staff of St. Mary's Cathedral, which was set on fire, were taken hostage.

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines also reported that the main building, science laboratories, and library of Dansalan College, a Protestant school, were also set on fire.

Duterte cut short his visit to Moscow after he announced that "units of the Islamic State Group" occupied Marawi and a military operation was ongoing.

The president has repeatedly warned that he would declare martial law to quell security threats in the country, especially in Mindanao.

No need for martial law

Religious leaders and civil society groups, however, said there was no need for Duterte to put Mindanao under military rule.

"Putting the whole of Mindanao under martial law is very dangerous and vulnerable to abuse," said Alih Aiyub, secretary-general of the Ulama Council of the Philippines.

The Muslim religious leader told ucanews.com that "innocent people might be caught in the crossfire or might be arrested illegally by mere suspicion."

"Fighting terrorism does not need the declaration of martial law because our existing laws are more than enough to enforce it," said Aiyub.

Filipinos have been wary of martial law since it was used by former dictator Ferdinand Marcos to remain in power for two decades until his ouster in 1986.

Bishop Jose Collin Bagaforo of Kidapawan in Mindanao said the declaration of martial law could have been limited to Marawi City and surrounding areas "not all of Mindanao."

Redemptorist Father Amado Picardal, head of the Basic Ecclesial Communities of the bishops' conference, said declaring martial law across Mindanao while only Marawi was attacked "is either idiotic or an excuse to expand dictatorial control."

Military rule not justified

Activist groups said the declaration of martial law is not justified and will only invite more problems.

"Duterte is playing with fire if he thinks it is a solution to Philippine problems," said Jose Maria Sison, founding chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

Sison, who was detained during Marcos' rule, warned Duterte not to be another dictator and use the present crisis in Marawi to justify military rule in the Philippines.

Human rights group Karapatan, meanwhile, called for "a deeper investigation" into the Marawi attack, saying that the martial law declaration is "an uncalled-for response."

"Martial Law will inevitably result in intensified military operations, including aerial strikes, which can kill and affect hundreds of civilians," said Cristina Palabay, Karapatan secretary-general.

Moro organization Suara Bangsamoro, meanwhile, appealed to the military not to conduct aerial bombings in Marawi to flush out the Maute fighters.

"We call on the Duterte administration to address the instability through talks and diplomatic means," said Jerome Succor Aba, Suara Bangsamoro chairman.

The Maute group, also known as the Islamic State of Lanao, is a radical Islamist group composed mostly of former Moro Islamic Liberation Front fighters.

Suara Bangsamoro's Aba said the group aligned itself with the so-called Islamic State after members got "frustrated with the direction the Moro people's struggle for self-determination."

"The establishment of a new caliphate and a global Islamic State has become an inspiring goal to the group because of the government's insincerity in resolving the core problems of the Moro people," said Aba.
