

Philippine cardinal Tagle calls for troop withdrawal from tribal lands

Indigenous communities are victims of an intensifying conflict in Mindanao



Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila has called on the Philippine government to withdraw troops from tribal communities after thousands of indigenous people in the southern region of Mindanao fled their homes because of alleged atrocities committed by soldiers.

"We call on our government leaders to let peace reign. It means the pullout of troops from the community of our tribal people," Cardinal Tagle said in a statement he read out before some 700 indigenous people holding a monthlong protest in the national capital.

Cardinal Tagle also called for the "dismantling and disarming of paramilitary groups" that have been repeatedly accused of committing atrocities against tribal communities in the southern part of the country.

The cardinal made a surprise visit early Nov. 11 to the cluster of tents in the heart of Manila, less than a kilometer from the archbishop's residence, that serves as a makeshift camp for protesting indigenous people from Mindanao.

"What happened to our indigenous brothers and sisters in Mindanao is sad and worrisome," Cardinal Tagle said. "Some of them have already died and [been] killed. Many were forced to flee and abandon their homes and ancestral lands."

Some 700 tribal people from Mindanao, collectively known as lumad, arrived in Manila Oct. 26 in a protest caravan to dramatize their demand for the withdrawal of troops in tribal communities.

The monthlong march, dubbed Manilakbayan, or "Journey to Manila," aimed to create national awareness on the plight of indigenous peoples.

Data from an indigenous peoples' group, Katribu, shows that at least 53 lumads have been killed since 2010 when President Benigno Aquino came to power. Katribu's documentation shows that the killings intensified in 2015, claiming 13 lives as of Sept. 1.

Tribal leaders in Mindanao earlier called on the country's Catholic bishops to "actively intervene to end the militarization of areas where tribal communities live."

In his statement, Cardinal Tagle called on the Philippine military and the rebel National Democratic Front, which has been fighting the government for more than four decades, to create "peace zones" in tribal communities.

The prelate also appealed for help for indigenous people who have fled their homes and continue to stay in evacuation centers. "They need food, water, medicine, care and understanding," Cardinal Tagle said.

In a symbolic gesture of solidarity, the Manila archbishop handed an envelope containing 10,000 pesos (about US\$212) to the protesting tribal people.

"Let us help them. Let us do our best to help them return to their homes and land, and live there in safety and peace," the cardinal said. "Let justice prevail, and those guilty of killing tribal leaders should be made accountable."

Some 3,000 indigenous people continue to live in makeshift shelters in Surigao del Sur province after fleeing their villages on Sept. 1 when paramilitary troops shot and killed two tribal leaders and the director of a tribal school.

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