

# Philippine Protestant and Catholic leaders plan continued activism: Against extrajudicial killings and environmental destruction

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Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders in the Philippines, Asia's most predominantly Christian nation, have said they plan to be as active in the affairs of civil society this year as they have been in the past.

Christians have been active in the social and political life of this mainly Catholic country, particularly in the campaigns against environmentally destructive industries and extrajudicial killings. They have also supported farmers' calls for genuine agrarian reform and have been involved in peace-building efforts.

Both the Catholic Bishops Conference and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines have condemned environmentally destructive industries such as large-scale mining. The council's general secretary, Rex Reyes, said such mining dislocates and further impoverishes indigenous and rural populations.

In 2007 both groups also demanded peaceful negotiations in armed conflicts between the government and the communist-led New People's Army and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. "We surely will pursue the peace talks in the days ahead," Reyes said.

Many Filipinos view the military as tainted by corruption since the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos ruled from 1972 to 1986. Critics said Marcos made the military his private army. Protestant minister Daneck Dang-awan said he and other chaplains at the Philippine Military Academy hope to strengthen the moral and spiritual character of cadets to withstand the temptations.

The issue of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines gained international prominence after churches sent a delegation to Washington, D.C., last March.

Led by a Catholic and two Protestant bishops and six leaders of human rights organizations, the delegation spoke at a congressional hearing about political killings of more than 800 civilians and the disappearances of another 196 since 2001. Those killed have included priests, pastors, human rights workers, labor and farm leaders and journalists—all of them strong critics of the government.

The council's international campaign against extrajudicial killings paid off. Senator Barbara Boxer (D., Calif.) convinced her colleagues to investigate the use of U.S. military aid to the Philippines in perpetrating such killings and other human rights violations.

Late last year the Catholic bishops gave high-profile support to 54 farmers from Sumilao in the southern Philippines who were seeking plots of land to till as provided for by the country's 1987 agrarian reform law. The farmers dramatized their call by marching for two months, starting October 10, to Manila. A number of Catholic seminarians took part in the march.

While the conference and council generally have been critical of the government in Manila, evangelist Brother Mike Velarde, who leads a Catholic renewal group called El Shaddai, has served as President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's spiritual adviser.

Velarde has blessed some of Arroyo's controversial actions, including the pardon granted to former president Joseph Estrada, who was supposed to serve a life sentence after being found guilty of large-scale corruption. – *Ecumenical News International*