

Filipino United Methodists give shelter amid violence against protesting farmers

by [Gladys Mangiduyos](#) in the [May 25, 2016](#) issue

A United Methodist church compound in the Philippines gave sanctuary to 4,000 farmers and indigenous people for more than a week after a recent protest for food relief turned deadly.

United Methodists have been speaking out against human rights violations against the Lumads, an indigenous people from the southern part of the nation, who have been caught in combat between government soldiers and paramilitary rebels. According to some reports, entire Lumad communities have been displaced.

Ciriaco Q. Francisco, bishop of the Davao area, faced harassment and threats for sheltering the protesters.

“My heart is bleeding, seeing Lumad farmers being deprived of rice,” Francisco said during a service April 17 in Quezon City, reflecting on the church’s actions.

He called it risk-taking mission work. “Are you willing to take the risk?” he asked his audience. “Would you be willing to spread scriptural holiness?”

At the service a farmer, Arlene Amar, spoke about the drought destroying her crops.

“We can survive not eating thrice a day, but we will never ever allow that our kids starve,” Amar said. “We just tell them, ‘Let us just wait and we will have rice soon.’”

According to news reports, 5,000 farmers from eight municipalities assembled March 30 along Quezon Boulevard, blocking the national highway. They were demanding rice from part of the calamity fund administered by the government for those facing starvation from the El Niño-related drought that has plagued the area since November.

The Philippines National Police and security forces fired on the crowd blocking a major highway on April 1, killing two protesters and injuring more than 100. Protesters poured into the Spottswood Methodist Mission Center for refuge. Police surrounded the compound and searched those at the center on April 2 but found no guns.

During a recent senate hearing in Davao City, Francisco testified that police blocked church members from entering or leaving the church, ordering them to sign a logbook. And they held up food donations, he said.

Two other bishops—Rodolfo A. Juan of the Manila area and Pedro M. Torio Jr. of the Baguio area—joined Francisco in a pastoral letter in response, writing that “entire communities of men, women, and children ache in hunger, mourning and desolation, as their cries for food were answered through the barrel of a gun. As bullets rained upon them and pierced their bodies, the gathered crowd sought only the fulfillment of a simple prayer: rice for their families.”

Juan spoke against the the intrusion of armed personnel into the church compound and the threats to Francisco.

“We stand on our grounds that the church is a sanctuary for the most vulnerable and those in need of a refuge,” Juan said.

Marie Sol Villalon, cochair of Promotion of Church People’s Response, a Filipino ecumenical human rights organization, said in a statement that the nation is facing a crisis.

“When the hunger of the poor brings violent responses from those in leadership, these leaders are not fit to govern,” the statement said. “As they have lived for decades with inadequate access to basic needs and services, drought conditions are literally unbearable.” —United Methodist News Service