

Armed men kill Oblate priest in southern Philippines

COTABATO, Philippines – An Oblate priest was shot to death when he resisted armed men trying to take him from his southern Philippine mission, said the congregation's Philippine superior.

Father Jesus Reynaldo Roda, 53, was praying in the Notre Dame of Tabawan School chapel late Jan. 15 when armed men "barged in" and tried to take him away, said Father Ramon Bernabe, who heads the Philippine province of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

In a written report to the Asian church news agency UCA News Jan. 16, the provincial said Father Roda "struggled and resisted" efforts to take him and "explicitly said that he preferred to be killed right there and then."

Witnesses reported that Father Roda was beaten, then shot dead, and "the armed men also took some valuables from his office before fleeing." Initial reports said the men forced Omar Taup, a male Muslim teacher from the school, to leave with them.

Father Roberto Layson, coordinator of the Oblate interreligious dialogue program, said Father Roda's death might have something to do with politicians angered by his work against fraud in last year's election. Father Roda had received threats recently, but refused an offer of protection, Father Layson added.

Father Roda headed the Oblate mission on Tabawan for 10 years. Tabawan is one of 457 islands that make up Tawi-Tawi province, where nearly 96 percent of the more than 322,000 people counted in the 2000 national census were Muslim.

Father Roda was born in Cotabato province Feb. 5, 1954. After his priestly ordination in 1980, he served in a Manila parish, where he set a trend he would follow the rest of his life: working with those he called "the anawim," a biblical reference to lost and forgotten people.

In his autobiography in the Oblate-run Mindanao Cross newspaper, Father Roda

wrote that visa difficulties and “pastoral demands in the Philippines” left his wish to be a missionary among Muslims in Indonesia or Malaysia unfulfilled.

After 12 years on the island of Mindanao, he served 1992-1997 in Thailand. When he returned, he worked in Tawi-Tawi and was assigned to Tabawan in 1998.