

Bishops say they want genuine solutions to corruption

QUEZON CITY, Philippines - Several Philippine bishops said they want genuine solutions to corruption whether or not they support calls for the resignation of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

"We really do not want any more of this corruption," Bishop Arturo Bastes of Sorsogon told the Asian church news agency UCA News Feb. 22. In the bishop's view, however, removing Arroyo is "not the solution."

"The whole system has to be overhauled, because she is just one of the whole web of corruption," he said. The situation will not improve "without change of mind, change of heart of everybody."

"We have heard about corruption involving millions of pesos from a long time ago," Bishop Bastes said, noting that removing Arroyo would be like "jumping from one fire to another." He said this would result in "instability, destroy the rule of law and make a mockery of our country."

His diocesan social action center has scheduled a "prayer rally for truth" in Sorsogon Feb. 26. Other groups, including student and religious groups, have been calling for the president to step down amid Senate hearings on the alleged overpricing of a government broadband contract to fund kickbacks for officials.

Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi of Caceres, a former president of the Philippine bishops' conference, said he does not believe the conference should join the movement for Arroyo's resignation, "even though there is strong suspicion of graft," which he said is "not just the sin of the few in power, but a communal sin."

The bishops are "cautious, not afraid," he added.

"We must follow the constitutional method," not use the type of "people power" revolution that deposed Ferdinand Marcos as president in 1986, he said.

Rodolfo Lozada Jr., a former forestry department official, testified at Senate hearings that he was consulted on the government project to build a national broadband network. He told senators the contract for the project with a Chinese company was overpriced and that the resigned head of the Commission on Elections wanted a \$130 million "commission." Lozada said he heard the former commission head discuss the broadband deal on the phone with Arroyo's husband.

Archbishop Angel Lagdameo of Jaro, president of the bishops' conference, issued a statement praising Lozada's confessions. The Philippine Daily Inquirer newspaper described the conference's response as "lame" and "shallow," and leaders of movements calling for Arroyo's resignation have been asking why Archbishop Lagdameo has not supported the movements.

In a Feb. 21 statement sent to UCA News, retired Bishop Francisco Claver of Malaybalay asked whether backing the removal of a president through "people power" is more than a political question for bishops, "precisely because the danger is there that, with another ... ousting of an incumbent president, we help firm up a tradition of unstable governments."

"Is it a moral duty incumbent on (bishops) to see to it that we do not go the way of institutionalized instability?" he asked. "Our problem comes down to how to correct the aberration that is the present administration without destroying the stabilizing structure that is our democratic system of government."

He suggested that Filipinos "put our heads together" so the "whole house doesn't come crashing down on us."

Meanwhile, other bishops told UCA News it is time Arroyo resigned or took a leave of absence.

Bishop Antonio Tobias of Novaliches called Arroyo a "lame duck" president who "continues to feed the greed" of the people to whom she owes her presidency.

Bishop Edwin de La Pena of Marawi said that while he does not believe the president should resign it would be "a good idea to take a leave of absence."