

Bishops to issue statement on political crisis, corruption

MANILA, Philippines - Fifty-five Catholic bishops in the Philippines agreed to issue a statement on the crisis in President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's government amid allegations of corruption in a national broadband deal.

Bishop Deogracias Iniguez of Kalookan, chairman of the public affairs committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, told reporters the conference president, Archbishop Angel Lagdameo of Jaro, invited interested bishops to a special meeting Feb. 26 in Manila.

The focus of their discussion was what is happening in the country in connection with the alleged overpricing of the broadband contract to pay off commissions, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. Arroyo's husband has been implicated in the deal.

Bishop Iniguez, who had celebrated Mass Feb. 25 to mark the anniversary of the 1986 "people power" uprising that deposed President Ferdinand Marcos, said the bishops' meeting was "extraordinary" because bishops meet in plenary session only twice a year.

The bishop is among a handful of about 100 bishops' conference members who have joined movements pressing for Arroyo's resignation. He said the country is in a "serious situation."

Archbishop Oscar Cruz of Lingayen-Dagupan, Bishop Antonio Tobias of Novaliches and retired Bishops Teodoro Bacani of Novaliches and Julio Labayen of Infanta are other prelates who have declared Arroyo has lost legitimacy to govern and must

resign.

Bishop Labayen told UCA News he was happy with the results of the bishops' discussion. He said he told fellow bishops during the daylong meeting "to listen to the people, and they seem to have done it."

Others who attended said the bishops agreed to issue a statement, which the conference was still deliberating.

Bishop Honesto Pacana of Malaybalay said that based on the discussions he did not expect bishops to support the call for Arroyo to resign.

However, he thought they were inclined to call on the president to rescind her executive order preventing government officials from testifying in hearings on government deals. Bishop Pacana said the bishops want a genuine, free and independent investigation into the allegations of corruption.

The bishops' conference has refrained from joining the call for Arroyo to resign, but anti-Arroyo groups have been urging the conference to issue a statement on Arroyo and the canceled \$329 million national broadband network contract with China's ZTE Corp.