

Filipinos take refuge in church as firefights rage in Libyan capital

MANILA, Philippines – Filipinos trapped in the violent upheaval in Libya took refuge inside the cathedral of the apostolic vicariate of Tripoli as they awaited word that safe passage out of the country was secured, a missionary priest said.

The Filipinos had camped out in St. Francis Church in Tripoli since Feb. 21 as firefights raged around the Libyan capital, said Franciscan Father Hermilo Vilason.

The priest, who serves as chaplain to Filipino migrants in Libya, told the Philippine bishops' Episcopal Commission for Pastoral Care for Migrants and Itinerant People that people have awakened daily to the sound of gunfire, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

"At times sporadic and at times continuous," Father Vilason said in correspondence to Father Edwin Corros, the commission's executive secretary.

The priest said helicopters can be heard overhead but not seen.

"Bishop Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli told us to stay inside the church rather than be put in danger outside," Father Vilason said.

The Filipinos have nowhere to go because only two of the temporary residents of the church speak Arabic. He remained optimistic, however, that the group would be safe inside the church.

"Nobody since 1971 dared to hurl stones or create any trouble within the church compound," he said.

Bishop Martinelli also asked the Filipinos to continue praying for their safety, saying their fate is in God's hands.

The Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs said it had sent emissaries to Libya to work for safe passage out of the embattled North Africa country for the Filipinos.

About 26,000 Filipinos are in Libya. Most are professionals working for multinational corporations.