

Philippine Catholics differ over ruling on US Marine accused of rape

MANILA, Philippines – Some Catholics have lauded a Philippine Supreme Court verdict ordering that a U.S. serviceman's detention be switched to Philippine authority while he appeals his rape conviction.

However, his spiritual adviser said the American is a victim of politics, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

Good Shepherd Sister Maureen Catabian, who heads her congregation's Women, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office, backs the court ruling.

"This was a crime committed here in the Philippines against a Filipina so Smith should not be allowed to stay in the embassy," she said.

Supreme Court justices voted Feb. 11 that Marine Lance Cpl. Daniel Smith's detention "should be under Philippine authority."

The Makati Regional Court convicted him of raping a 22-year-old Filipina in the northern Philippines in 2005 while she was drunk. Three other servicemen accused of complicity were acquitted.

Smith, who has been held in the U.S. Embassy compound in Manila since 2006, appealed his sentence of 40 years' imprisonment with no pardon or release in the first 30 years.

Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo and U.S. Ambassador Kristie Kenney signed an agreement to transfer Smith from the Makati City jail to the U.S. Embassy grounds while his conviction was under appeal.

The recent court ruling ordered the Philippine government to renegotiate with the U.S. Embassy to transfer Smith to Philippine authorities. No deadline was specified.

Smith can remain in custody at the embassy during these negotiations, UCA News reported.

Bishop Deogracias Iniguez of Kalookan, who heads the public affairs committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, said that in ordering Smith's transfer to a local detention facility the Philippines is "asserting its sovereign rights ... (and) that's good."

However, Jesuit Father James Reuter, who has been ministering to Smith since 2006, called the court decision "terrible news."

"Daniel does not deserve to be sent to Muntinlupa (the national penitentiary) because he was wrongly convicted of rape," he said.

The American priest believes his compatriot is "caught in the middle" of a campaign against the Visiting Forces Agreement, which allows the United States to hold military training exercises in the Philippines. While the Marine may have had sex with the victim, leftists have "made this a political case," he said.

A statement posted on the U.S. Embassy Web site says it has "taken note of the Supreme Court decision" and referred it to Washington, UCA News reported.