Police file charges against officials at church retreat center

MURINGOOR, India – Police have filed criminal charges against 10 top officials of a popular Catholic retreat center in southern India. The accused include two Vincentian priests and a nun.

The charges against the Divine Retreat Center officials were filed April 30 at the direction of Kerala state's High Court, which ordered a probe of the center more than a year ago, reported UCA News, an Asian church news agency. The charges come under Indian Penal Code sections dealing with criminal conspiracy, wrongful confinement, voluntarily causing harm with dangerous weapons, poisoning and tampering with evidence, said a police official who did not want to be identified.

The center's director said the chief police investigator had a vendetta against the center.

Billed as Asia's largest Catholic charismatic renewal center, the complex managed by Vincentian priests is located in Muringoor. It draws 10,000 people for its weekly retreats, conducted in seven languages.

On March 10, 2006, the High Court, reportedly acting on an anonymous letter and two compact discs it received, took up the case "suo motu" (on its own initiative) and appointed a senior police official, Vincent M. Paul, to head the probe. His team investigated allegations of sexual harassment, mysterious deaths, foreign exchange violations and the management of a hospital without a license, said the police official.

Those now charged in the case are Fathers George Panackal, the center's director, and Mathew Thadathil, its administrator, a nun and seven others.
According to the investigation report, 974 unnatural deaths occurred at the center between 1996 and 2006, and the bodies were disposed of without informing local police. The report alleged that the center forged documents to make the deaths appear natural.

The center began operating three decades ago. It manages several subsidiary units on its land, including facilities that house and serve poor, sick and destitute people. One such facility is Shantipuram (City of Peace), which houses 450 mentally ill patients. The retreat center also runs a detoxification center for 150 substance abusers and a home for 100 destitute women. Another facility caters to 150 widows and abandoned wives and 300 children.

The report accused the center of running a mental hospital without a license and administering drugs without prescriptions from qualified medical professionals.

The charges are "grave and serious," said lawyer Jaya Shanker, who handles cases in the High Court. "The accused may get 10 years" of hard labor, he told UCA News.

Father Panackal, in a public statement, alleged a police vendetta against the center after it challenged the court-ordered investigation and filed a review petition in the Supreme Court.

"Our move irritated the investigation team," which resulted in the charges, he said. "We will deal with it legally," the priest added in his statement. He asked supporters to pray for the center.

Thomas Devaprasad, a journalist turned charismatic leader, said he was "anguished" by the "most unfortunate" turn of events. The center is caught in "controversy and conspiracy," he added. Without elaborating, he said, "time will reveal the conspiracy and expose the guilty."

The Vincentians who run the center are part of the Syro-Malabar Church, one of two Eastern Catholic churches based in Kerala.

Father Paul Thelakat, spokesman for the Syro-Malabar Church, told UCA News the church has "faith in the judicial system and will wait for the law to take its course."

Police have only leveled charges against the center's officials, Father Thelakat noted, and the legal process now requires they prove the charges. He added that no one can be judged guilty before the process is completed.
Nonetheless, the church is "sad … as one of our prime institutions is under attack," the priest said. "It was a center of hope for thousands of poor people who were

shunted aside by society.”