

## Let the one who has no sin be the first to cast a stone

Philippine bishops urge a charitable view on political scandals. Three prominent senators charged with graft and plunder.



Philippine Catholic bishops have urged people not to rush to judge politicians linked to a multi-million dollar scam that allegedly channeled government funds to private individuals and groups. The appeal came after charges of plunder - the most serious of all corruption charges - were laid on Friday against three of the Philippines' best known senators: former cabinet minister and president of the senate Juan Ponce Enrile, ex-president's son Jose "Jinggoy" Estrada and Ramon Revilla Jr.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference came to their aid with a supportive statement on Sunday. "Let the one who has no sin be the first to cast a stone," said the statement from Archbishop Socrates Villegas, president of the bishops' conference. "For those among us who are not accused, let us remember that the offenses with which those who now stand accused are charged could very well be the offense of any of us as well. Who are we to condemn?" Archbishop Villegas said.

He added that Filipinos should allow the legal system to take its course. "Those who have been charged must be dealt with the full force of the law. Everybody culpable, whatever their political affiliations may be, should be investigated and, if so warranted, indicted," he said. The following day the Office of the Ombudsman, the government's anti-corruption body, filed a combined total of 42 further graft charges against the three senators over their alleged involvement in what has become known as the 'pork barrel' scam.

In past years, some US\$4.5 million of 'pork barrel' funds were allocated annually to each of the country's 24 senators and \$US1.6 million to 294 Lower House lawmakers, for supposed development projects in their constituencies. A state audit revealed that some US\$229 million of it was misused between 2007 and 2009. The audit identified at least 12 senators and 180 members of Congress whose fund allocations were channeled to dubious non-government organizations. When the findings of the audit were revealed last August, they sparked widespread protests and demonstrations nationwide.

Speaking at the time, Cardinal Tagle of Manila described the scandal as part of an "intricate web of corruption", and added that those involved in the scam have "lost touch with the poor". However, at a press briefing on Tuesday, he seemed to strike a more conciliatory note. "I just wish that we would see it in a wider context, not only in the politicians but of the whole country and the whole Filipino culture," he said.

Cardinal Tagle added that Filipinos should "engage in soul searching" and "have a communal examination of conscience" on "how the systems of rewards and punishment can be implemented".

Cardinal Orlando Quevedo of Cotabato told ucanews.com that "all those implicated should be investigated. We pray for everyone," he said.

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