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Philippine authorities are doing their best to win the hearts and minds of people amid allegations that police officers have been behind many of the thousands of drug-related killings that have stained the country's image in recent years.

In the central Philippines, poflice have been hosting a traditional "Flores de Mayo," ("Flowers of May") celebration in honor of Mary at a police camp, ucanews.com reported.

Flores de Mayo is a festival held in May. It is one of the many Filipino devotions to the Mary that culminates with a ritualistic pageant on the last day of the month.

Police in Palo in Leyte province seemed to be succeeding in impressing young Catholics at their festival.

"I feel safer here," said Marie Pathyma Ilanan, 13. She even brought her younger siblings to the police camp's chapel to attend the celebration.

"I like it here because they also have a nice playground," said Beitina Therese Maceda, 11, who joined about 250 other children at the event.

She said she "learned a lot about religion and children's rights" from the police officers.

"I want to be closer to Mama Mary, and I was enlightened here through the Bible class," she explained.

Police Lt. Col. Bella Rentuaya, regional police spokeswoman, said law enforcement officers did their best to teach children how to become "God-loving, responsible human beings and disciplined citizens."

"Aside from teaching them how to pray, we also provide lessons on rights awareness and health issues," Rentuaya said.

Florlyn Gapul, a police officer who worked with the children, admitted that since the government launched its anti-narcotics war in 2016, there has been an "apparent gap" on how the public look at law enforcement authorities.

"We are doing (Flores de Mayo) to bridge the gap," she said.

At least 4,948 suspected drug users and dealers have died during police operations from July 1, 2016, to Sept. 30, 2018, according to government statistics.

Human rights groups, however, say the figures do not include thousands of others killed by unidentified gunmen that were classified by police as "homicides under investigation."

Carlos Conde, Philippines researcher for Human Rights Watch's Asia division, told ucanews.com that, "no amount of (public relations) will improve the police's image among the public unless they stop violating people’s basic rights."

"The (police) have no business conducting a Flores de Mayo," Conde said, adding that, "it is a religious celebration."

"It is unconscionable that the (Philippine National Police) can hijack the Flores de Mayo for propaganda purposes," he said.

Gapul, however, said police officers were simply trying to reach out to the community "to win back what was lost in the way people look at us."

She said holding the Marian festival with the children "brings out the soft side of the police."

"We are also human ... we have hearts. ... We also believe that Jesus Christ is the real authority. We are led by God," Gapul said.

Michelle, who asked that her real name not be used, said she sent her children to the camp activity despite her husband having been arrested by the police for using drugs.

"I look at policemen as good people," said the 35-year-old, noting that she is "happy because the (police officers) give snacks to the children."

Flores de Mayo is believed to have started in the Philippines in the mid-1800s when Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception of Mary as Catholic dogma.

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