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A Catholic priest accused of fraud in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh has been remanded in judicial custody for 15 days.

Ucanews.org reported Fr. Anand Muttungal, a priest of the Archdiocese of Bhopal, was arrested Dec. 11 at his residence by officials of the Economic Offense Wing, a special branch of the Madhya Pradesh police department that investigates financial cases. After his arrest, he appeared before a court and was remanded into custody until Dec. 26.

Richard James, a spokesman for Muttungal, described the priest's arrest as illegal and arbitrary and said the priest was a victim of a large conspiracy, ucanews.org reported.

"He will come out clean from the charges against him, and the real culprits will be exposed," he said. The spokesman said he and those supporting the embattled priest have full faith in the judicial system and that Muttingal "will get justice."

Muttungal, a former spokesman and public relations officer for the nine dioceses in Madhya Pradesh, faces charges that include cheating, forgery, criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust.

The case against the 47-year-old priest and seven others was filed Oct. 17 at an Economic Offense Wing police station in Bhopal, more than two years after a

complaint was lodged against them by a group of laypeople.

According to the April 2017 complaint, laypeople accused the priest of duping 377 people after promising residential plots through a housing society, St. Jude Colonizers, formed under his initiative as a Catholic public relations officer. The society was formed in 2009.

Roy John Thatta and Vipin Toppo, two members of the housing society, were named in the complaint as accomplices in the forgery plot.

"The priest is the first among eight people named as accused in the first information report despite the fact that he is not a member of the society," an anonymous EOW official said.

The police's preliminary findings accuse the priest, as the archdiocesan public relations officer, of conspiring with Toppo and Thatta, one of his employees, to dupe home buyers.

In 2013, Muttungal filed a police complaint alleging that Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal and two priests had conspired to make him mentally unstable through slow poisoning. The case is still pending before a court.

Cornelio told ucanews.org the archdiocese has nothing to do with the recent case and accused Muttungal of making "a fake case against me and two of my priests."

"Still I pray for him despite the fact that he keeps accusing me for all disturbances in his life. All these years I have been silently suffering for his misdeeds and the smear campaign he carried out against me," Cornelio said.

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