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About 300 Indigenous people march Feb. 23 in Quezon City, Philippines, during a nine-day march to protest the construction of the Kaliwa Dam in their ancestral domain in the Sierra Madre mountain range. (Newscom/Sipa USA/Pacific Press/Edd Castro)



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While some 300 members of Indigenous groups from the Philippines' Sierra Madre mountain range were on a nine-day, 148-kilometer protest march from Quezon province to metro Manila to stop a dam from being constructed in their ancestral domain, a community of contemplative nuns were praying a nine-day novena in their Carmelite monastery in the mountains' foothills as their show of support.

Likewise, the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, an intercongregational group of religious immersed in rural and Indigenous communities, issued a pledge of support in Filipino, while the STOP Kaliwa Dam Network initiated a petition against the construction of the Kaliwa Dam, a government project meant to boost water supply in metro Manila. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines stated its opposition in 2018.

After traveling through three provinces, the marchers arrived in metro Manila on Feb. 22 as preparations were underway for the 37th anniversary of the People Power revolt that toppled the Marcos dictatorship on Feb. 25, 1986. The marchers were accommodated at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University where priests concelebrated Mass for their cause at the campus' Church of the Gesu the following day.



Indigenous marchers attend Mass Feb. 23 in the Church of the Gesu at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. (Karina Bolasco)

On Feb. 23, the demonstrators, many of them in tribal attire and carrying placards, marched on the city streets and headed to the offices of the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources before proceeding to Malacañang Palace, where President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. resides and works.

The marchers were not received in either government office, and they could not get near the palace because of police barricades.

"After such a long and grueling march, his [Marcos'] failure to face us is infuriating," Agta community leader Ramcy Astoveza told the Philippine Daily Inquirer.



Some 300 members of Indigenous communities march toward Malacañang Palace in Manila, Philippines, to air their plea to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The protesters were turned away by police. (Lito Ocampo)

In a TV interview, a marcher in a tribal costume denied a government official's statement that not all marchers in costumes were from Indigenous communities: "Our community prohibits anyone who is not a member from wearing our costume."

A report said a faction belonging to the tribes has consented to the dam's construction and would be receiving 160 million pesos for their consent.

The government-owned Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System is spearheading the dam's construction set to start soon; its completion set for 2026. The project partners with China Energy Engineering Company. It will cost 12.2 billion pesos, of which China is lending about 85%.

The Save Sierra Madre Network Alliance estimates that around 1,465 families will be affected but the impact of the construction of the dam on other living things is incalculable. While the protesters recognize metro Manila's water needs that could be boosted by the dam, they are clamoring for alternatives and saying "yes to better water solutions," according to the STOP Kaliwa Dam Network petition.

On Feb. 23, the Carmelite nuns ended their daily novena, which said: "Do not allow, Lord, the construction of the Kaliwa Dam and other infrastructures that would destroy our mountains and forests. May we be united and have a stand in facing and addressing the reality of global warming and climate emergency. May we have compassion and mercy for our Indigenous brothers and sisters who are always sacrificing because of our lack of care and abuse of nature."

Their statement posted to Facebook on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 22, read:

> As Carmelite contemplative nuns living in the embrace of nature, at the foothills of Sierra Madre, our hearts echo the words of St. John of the Cross in his poem, Spiritual Canticle, "My beloved is the mountain and the lonely wooded valleys."
>
> In beholding the majesty, grandeur, and beauty of the Sierra Madre Mountains, we experience God's presence in His creation which is but a faint reflection of His majesty, grandeur, and beauty."



The Discalced Carmelites of Infanta, Quezon province, prayed a novena to support the marchers against Kaliwa Dam. The nuns are seen here during the silver jubilee for profession of Mother Prioress Dulce Inlayo in October 2022. (Ma. Ceres P. Doyo)

The statement continued, "From the very beginning of Infanta Carmel's foundation, Bishop Julio X. Labayen and our foundresses had the 'Care for the Poor' and 'Care for the Earth' at heart."

Inaugurated in 1981, the Carmelite Monastery in Infanta, Quezon, was inspired by Labayen, a Carmelite himself and known progressive bishop who espoused "preferential option for the poor."

Infanta Carmel belongs to the Order of Discalced Carmelites and to the federation of 21 Carmels in the Philippines. Unlike most of its older counterparts elsewhere, where very strict enclosure is observed, life in Infanta Carmel is not defined by high walls and confining cloisters. The monastery is located at the edge of a forest and the

nuns are in constant communion with nature and the community around them through the liturgy and other prayerful activities.

The Ash Wednesday statement recalled a 2004 flash flood that claimed hundreds of lives in Quezon, among them a priest who risked and lost his own life to save others. Illegal logging and deforestation were mainly to blame.



Filipino villagers carry relief goods in Infanta, Philippines, Dec. 20, 2004, following a typhoon and three tropical storms in the span of two weeks that left nearly 1,800 people dead or missing. (CNS/Reuters)

Mother Prioress Dulce Inlayo spoke about the people's trauma caused by the 2004 landslide. "When the rainy season begins, fear and anxiety set in and sleepless nights begin for those in the low-lying areas."

The monastery served as an evacuation center in 2004. "We gave all we could at that time," she told EarthBeat.

Inlayo shared verses she wrote after the 2004 flood that left Infanta in ruins:

> There are dreams that will never be
> Having been swept by the flood
> Swallowed by the sea.
> There are clipped wings that will never fly
> for as long as the dark cloud of injustice
> hovers in the sky ...
> There are prayers for the healing of Mother Mountain
> that will remain unanswered
> unless your heart and mine repent and
> remember. Yes, remember.

As early as 2018, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines expressed its opposition to the dam and urged parties to search for alternatives.

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With Infanta Bishop Bernardino Cortez as lead signatory and 55 bishops signing, the conference's statement urged the government and the people "to work together to resolve our water issues." It offered points to consider, among them "to 'rethink how to use water' in terms of the demand-side and consumption and protect our environment."

The bishops described the to-be-constructed dam as 'a sword hanging over the heads' of 100,000 people living downstream the Kaliwa River."

The bishops cited the World Commission on Dams' statement that "the future for water and energy resources development lies with participatory decision-making, using a rights-and-risks approach that will raise the importance of the social and environmental dimension of dams to a level once reserved for the economic dimension."



Protesters, mostly Indigenous peoples, rally outside the Chinese Consulate in suburban Makati in metro Manila on Oct. 5, 2018, to oppose Chinese funding of the Kaliwa Dam and other infrastructure projects in the Philippines. (AP/Bullit Marquez)

The often "red-tagged" (labeled as communist sympathizers by government elements), the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines said in a statement:

> We stand with the towering Sierra Madre, with her resplendent biodiversity, the flora, the fauna, her Kaliwa watershed, her mineral resources and the people whom she nurtures and nourishes. Even as tunnel-boring machines pierce the hills of Teresa, Rizal to span 28 kilometers into General Nakar in Quezon, we weep over the greed of government officials who build, build, build, when they should protect and preserve our environment.

The group's former head, Good Shepherd Sr. Elenita Belardo, and co-workers were recently acquitted from what they called "trumped up charges" of perjury initiated in

2019 by the national security adviser of then-President Rodrigo Duterte.

The Kaliwa Dam's review and approval were expedited through Duterte's administrative order.

Protection of Indigenous peoples' ancestral domain is provided for in the 1986 Philippine Constitution. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples was established to look after their interests and Indigenous peoples have, over the years, fought to preserve their ancestral domains.

The most widely known effort was the fight, led by Kalinga chief Macli-ing Dulag, against the proposed hydroelectric Chico River Dam in the Cordillera region. Dulag was gunned down by soldiers in his mountain home in 1980 and is now hailed as a hero by his people and many Filipinos. The dam did not push through.



Clouds cover the Sierra Madre mountain range at sunrise as seen from Rodriguez township, Rizal province, Philippines. (AP/Bullit Marquez)

The marchers and their supporters from environmental and church groups vow to continue protesting the Kaliwa Dam, which they fear would inundate 9,700 hectares of watershed areas that form part of their ancestral domain in Quezon and Rizal provinces.

The Sierra Madre is the country's longest mountain range, stretching 500 kilometers across 10 provinces on the eastern side facing the Pacific Ocean. It stands as a buffer against destructive typhoons emanating from the Pacific Ocean that regularly wreak havoc on the lowlands. Myths and legends have been woven about the Sierra Madre, Spanish for mountain mother.

The Sierra Madre is not only where the Philippines' so-called "last great forest" thrives, it is also home to Indigenous communities called Dumagat-Remontado and Agta of Quezon and Rizal provinces. Its rich ecosystem is a showcase of biodiversity and of rare flora and fauna, some of which are endangered and endemic only to the Philippines.

The STOP Kaliwa Dam Network petition, like the Philippine bishops' statement, quoted Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home": "Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profits is truly interested in their preservation. But the cost of the damage caused by such selfish lack of concern is much greater than the economic benefits to be obtained."