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Eagerness grows over Pope Francis' visits to Asia

by N.J. Viehland

NCR Today

Manila, Philippines — Reports of Pope Francis' plans to visit the Philippines and Sri Lanka in January spread quickly in media here Tuesday.

Pope Francis confirmed Monday aboard the papal flight from Jerusalem that he will visit the Philippines and Sri Lanka for two days in January, according to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

The *Philippine Star* newspaper's article declaring "Confirmed: Pope Francis to visit Philippines in January" drew more than 4,000 "likes" on Facebook within hours of its posting. The pope's announcement also made the television primetime news.

However, a communications officer for Manila's archdiocese, Corazon Yamsuan, said in a text message to *NCR* that the archdiocese has not received official word on the reported visit.

Archbishop Jose Palma of Cebu told the *Sun Star* just after last year's conclave that his predecessor, retired Cardinal Ricardo Vidal, and Manila Cardinal Luis Tagle had invited Francis to the Philippines for the International Eucharistic Congress in 2016, to be hosted by Cebu. Although Francis had declared his wish to visit the Philippines, it was not certain whether he would come to the meeting; historically, popes have sent representatives.

Recently, Tagle told Catholic News Service about plans for a papal visit to Sri Lanka and the Philippines in a single trip next year.

After super Typhoon Haiyan struck in November, displacing millions of families in Eastern Samar, Leyte and other central Philippines provinces, talk of the pope's wish to visit victims continued to circulate long after Cardinal Robert Sarah, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the council

responsible for charity and humanitarian assistance, visited Palo in January to convey the pope's "oneness and solidarity" with survivors.

The president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, Archbishop Socrates Villegas, told CBCP News that should the pope come early next year, there would be enough time to prepare.

Catholics are not the only people excited for a visit from the pope. Fr. Joseph Benedict, social communications secretary of Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith of Colombo, Sri Lanka, told *NCR* earlier this year: "Even the Buddhists and other Christian denominations have sort of voiced their desire to see the Holy Father coming to Sri Lanka."

About 6 percent of the country's population is Catholic. More than 70 percent is Buddhist.

The Sri Lanka bishops' conference also had not received an official communique on the papal visit, Benedict said.

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Francis' first confirmed visit to Asia is his Aug. 14-18 trip to South Korea, where he is scheduled to join thousands of young adults in celebrating Asian Youth Day in Daejeon City.

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