



World | Philippines

Philippine priest probed over charges of rape, molestation

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Church investigates priest after teen files rape charges against him in Agusan criminal court

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GULF NEWS

Manila: The Catholic Church in southern Philippines created a committee to investigate accusations by a 17-year-old girl that she had been raped and molested by a 47-year-old parish priest, reports said.

The Butuan Diocese in Mindanao created a committee to determine the truth of the complaints against Friar Raul Cabonce, parish priest of St Anne in Tubay town, news stations *DZMM* and *ABS CBN* quoted Butuan City Bishop Juan de Dios Pueblos as saying.

Lana Linaban, secretary general of Gabriela, a women's group, said in a statement: "The Tribunal of First Instance of the Diocese of Butuan began investigating Friar Cabonce after keeping him in custody ... [on] two counts of rape [and] child abuse. Acts of lasciviousness

were filed against him before the Agusan del Norte provincial prosecutor's office last August 24."

The complainant, whose name has not been released, has been in the custody of Gabriela, Linaban said.

"Bishop Pueblos should not keep on protecting Cabonce," said Linaban.

Cabonce could be dismissed if found guilty by the Tribunal of First Instance of the Diocese of Butuan.

But the case has to be elevated to the National Tribunal of Appeals, retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz (of Lingayen), told the *Star*.

"If the victim is below 18 years old, the Vatican will handle the case," said Cruz who once served as a judicial vicar of the National Tribunal Appeals of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

The accused priest must be tried by the criminal court, Cruz said, but sources say this is unlikely since Cabonce's whereabouts have not been known since the case was filed against him.

Scholarship

Last June 2010, Cabonce offered the complainant a scholarship in order to finish her high school studies, in exchange for domestic work at the convent. She has 11 other siblings.

Last September, the parish priest allegedly groped the student when he asked her to give him a massage in the convent.

She was allegedly sexually assaulted on February 27 of this year, and was allegedly raped on March 4 and 14.

She ran away from the convent and stayed at the Missionary Sisters of Mary after she graduated from high school.

"I hope he will be imprisoned for his whole life," she told the *Inquirer*.