

## Kidnapped Irish priest released in Philippines

An abducted Irish Catholic priest was freed unharmed Thursday after one month in captivity in the southern Philippines, officials said.

Father Michael Sinnott, 79, was turned over to authorities in Zamboanga City, 875 km south of Manila, by the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), whose members were accused of being behind his kidnapping.

Sinnott was flown to Manila a few hours after he was recovered and he met briefly with Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Sinnott, who appeared well-rested and healthy, told the reporters during a press briefing that he was treated well by his captors and he hoped to continue his work in the Philippines.

'We've been travelling and hiking, and I feel a little bit tired, but otherwise, there's not a thing wrong with me, and I hope to continue my work for the next few years here in the Philippines,' he said.

Sinnott said that for a few days after he was seized from the Columban Missionary House in Pagadian City Oct 11, he lived in tough conditions but his kidnapers treated him well.

'The conditions were very primitive, but they have done more to make it easier for me,' he said. 'Food was adequate. They were very organised, and there seemed to be no problem getting supplies everyday.'

Sinnott, who underwent a quadruple bypass operation in 2005, said he hoped to return to Pagadian City to continue his work.

Director General Jesus Verzosa, national police chief, said no ransom was paid for Sinnott's release.

'The MILF was pressured,' he said.

The MILF, the largest Muslim separatist rebel group fighting for an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines, has denied involvement in the kidnapping.

MILF chief peace negotiator Mohagher Iqbal said a rebel task force recovered Sinnott from the kidnapers, who were led by a notorious Muslim bandit.

'We formed a task force to rescue Father Sinnott, and they were the ones who worked on the ground,' he said. 'The kidnapers turned him over to the MILF voluntarily because we pressured them, including their families.'

'Due to our moral authority, the kidnapers could not do anything but to turn him over,' he said.

The kidnapers had demanded \$2 million for his release.

Verzosa said police would further investigate the kidnapping and file criminal charges against those

involved.

'We will piece together all the evidence that we have, and we will charge those responsible in court in cooperation with Father Sinnott,' he said.

Presidential spokesman Cerge Remonde hailed Sinnott's release.

'We thank all those responsible for this,' he said. 'There should be no letup in the manhunt operations against those responsible.'

Sinnott was first assigned in 1957 in the southern region of Mindanao but left the country in 1966. He returned in 1976 and in 1998 established a school for disabled children in Pagadian City.

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