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Hi everyone,

I'm back in Kidapawan now, after our Council meeting in Zamboanga City. The Council agreed with the plan we had established here with the Bishop, that I would wait in Kidapawan for the chance to return to Columbio, rather than going to Manila or some other place farther away. I think that this gives the right message to the people of Columbio: that prudence calls for me to stay away for now, but that they have not been abandoned. I'm close and in touch, and at the earliest possible time, I will return. In the meantime, here is the latest development.

I told you already about the church workers who were arrested by the military and roughed up in an effort to make them admit to being communist insurgents. The bishop has written a letter of protest to the military, also mentioning the threat to the priests in Columbio. On November 1, the military attacked and "captured" an MILF camp near Columbio. I use the quotes because what it really means is that by the time the military reached the camp, there was no resistance; the MILF fighters had moved on. But it was not a real capture of territory, since the military did not even leave a contingent there. In fact the next day, MILF fighters attacked a military camp in Mayo (one of the villages of my parish) in retaliation.

Since that time there have been no more encounters, but the evacuation of civilians, both Muslim and Christian, from the area continues. It's a tense situation, with lots of rumors and stories. In fact, some people from the Poblacion of Columbio were getting ready to evacuate because of the report of an MILF ambush and killing of a soldier nearby. That rumor proved to be a false alarm, but it indicates the level of tension among the people.

As for the group which was threatening to kidnap a priest, the latest information we have is that it is actually not a Muslim group, but rather CAFGU (Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit), made up of both Muslims and Christians. These are paramilitary groups, trained and armed by the military for the "defense" of far flung areas. Sometimes they are orderly and disciplined, but it's also possible that they become simple hired thugs. It is uncommon, but not unheard of, that Muslims would also be members of CAFGU. Uncommon, because one of the specific purposes would be to engage the MILF; not unheard of, because there are potential monetary gains for members.

So, what would be the motive of this CAFGU group in regard to kidnapping a priest? If the military were planning a major operation in the area, or if some powerful person wanted to use CAFGU as thugs to sow terror, it would be easier to do so without a priest around, especially since Fr. Peter is head of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Diocese, which is well known for investigating and documenting abuses. In fact, one theory is that the whole kidnap scenario was created precisely to keep us away from the area. That's not to say that the threat would not be real if the opportunity presented itself, but maybe our staying away in itself serves the purposes of someone.

Of course, all of what I've just written remains speculation, much like many other plausible theories as to who is behind the kidnap threat.

The bottom line is, it is still not safe for us to travel to Columbio, so we remain in a waiting situation. There

is a diocesan priest who has agreed to go to Columbio for weekend pastoral activities, at least until the second week of December. Of course, if things improve dramatically before then, I would go back. If not, we will review the situation once again with the Bishop and the PIME Regional Superior, to see where we go from there. This week, I sent a letter along with the priest, to be read at the Mass, and communicated to all the GKK's of the parish. Here's what I wrote to them.

To the people of San Isidor Labrador Mission from Fr. Steve Baumbusch Beloved Brothers and Sisters,

May the blessings and peace of the Lord be with you! After one month of absence, I wanted to write to you and let you know how great is my love for you and how often I am thinking of you. I pray that the Lord will fill you with encouragement and that you may be united in love. As St. Paul wrote to his people in Colossia:

"Though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ."

We all know that this a difficult time and situation for all. There is confusion and danger. At a time like this, all the more do we need trust in the Lord and hearts open to all people. As for me, I am well in Kidapawan. I know that there have been some rumors, and I want to tell you this: I am NOT returning to the USA. I will NOT be receiving a new assignment in a different place or parish.

Columbio is my parish; you are my people. My feelings, my love and my heart are with you. Now I am eagerly waiting the opportunity to return to Columbio. I long to see you again; this is what will make me most happy.

I want to say many thanks to Frs. Gus and Jake, and especially to Fr. Eddie Pedregosa for their precious help during this time of emergency. My brothers and sisters, let us pray for one another. May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace based upon your faith in him, so that you may carry on in hope through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*United in Mission,
Fr. Steve Baumbusch, PIME*

Ok, that's all for now. I'll surely be in touch to let you know how things are developing. And I will continue to rely upon your prayers for me and my people.

Love,



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