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ASIA/PHILIPPINES - The Church next to the tribals, in the face of abuses in the tourist paradise of Boracay

Boracay (Agenzia Fides) - The Philippine island of Boracay is a tourist paradise, an island that includes beaches among the most beautiful of Southeast Asia. But it is also the scene of abuse and violence suffered by indigenous peoples of the island, the tribal Ati: the Philippine Church is deployed by their side, to defend the prerogatives, rights, and protect their very existence. This is what is reported to Fides Agency by Bishop Sergio Utleg, President of the Commission of the Filipinos Bishops for indigenous peoples, in the aftermath of the murder of Dexter Condez, tribal leader and spokesman of the Ati community of Boracay, killed on February 22: The local police arrested and charged Daniele Celestino with murder, a security guard of a chain of hotels in Boracay. Interviewed by Fides concerning the incident Bishop Utleg remarks: "It is one of the episodes that highlights what is happening in that area: due to extensive tourism marketing, these tribal people, who were the first settlers of the island are threatened, abused, deprived of their rights. Their land is occupied and the goal is to expel them altogether."
"As a Church - says the Bishop - we are close to the natives through apostolic groups, pastoral care and social action in the Diocese of Kalibo. We try to defend their rights and their lives. They are our brothers and sisters, innocent people and helpless in the face of abuse. Incidents like these happen also to leaders of other tribes in other parts of the country, like the island of Mindanao. We are on their side and ask the government of Manila to protect the dignity and rights of these people."
The indigenous Ati in Boracay are about 2,000 and claim the "ancestral domain" on lands, lamenting the destruction of the landscape and the environment due to building plans promoted by foreign companies and supported by the institutions. In January 2011, the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples of the Philippine government assigned the Ati two hectares of land in Boracay, certifying it as "ancestral domain", compared to more than a thousand hectares allocated to tourist resorts. In the territory of the island public works, roads or private buildings have initiated. The issue was brought to the attention of the Philippine Congress, but after two years, there have been no answers. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 28/02/2013)

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