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Release the Friend of the Indigenous People - Fr Stan Swamy

An Appeal by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC)

It is with great shock and agony, the FABC heard of the arrest of the 83-year-old Fr Stan Swamy and his incarceration. We are surprised at the charges brought against him. We stand in solidarity with Fr. Stan Swamy and all who support the rights of the indigenous people.

The media in India has expressed deep shock over the arrest of Fr Stan Swamy, who for three decades lived among the most deprived indigenous people of India.

The arrest and cold-hearted incarceration of Fr Stan Swamy reminds us of the treatment meted out to Mahatma Gandhi when he stood up for the rights of the Indian people. The colonial British government was too eager to incarcerate him for the 'crime' of asking for the dignity of his people. It was his dream that the least of India should be the central concern of a free India. Fr Stan Swamy was following Gandhi's nonviolent path to realize his dream.

The arrest is symptomatic of the treatment meted out to indigenous people in various parts of Asia. From the shores of South China Sea to the central parts of India, is a vast land once the homeland of indigenous people. Colonization destroyed them; nation-states disenfranchised them. Thousands have perished in the ecocide – killing of biosphere.

Asian market economy and its enablers have treated the indigenous communities with a colonial mentality – making them environmental refugees. The world is indebted to the indigenous communities for protecting Nature and giving it to the world. The forests and biosphere where the indigenous people lived proved to be the "lungs of the world".

When Asian governments choose to evict the indigenous people and offer their lands for corporate gain, they are opting to infect the lungs of the world. This is ecological Covid. Pope Francis has called for protecting the precious 'lungs' like Amazon, Congo and Asian forests.

Humanists like Fr Stan Swamy tried to save the world from the ecocide. We urge the concerned authorities to acknowledge the role the indigenous people play for the welfare of the world and release their people and those who support them.

India is a great nation, the land of the Mahatma and the spiritual mother of the whole of the East. We do hope its leaders will show sagacity and magnanimity in appreciating the services of Fr Stan Swamy and other indigenous people's leaders, releasing them as free citizens of India.

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Cardinal Charles Bo. SDB

President, Federation of Bishops Conference of Asia.

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