

American Missionaries Work Where Others Fear to Tread

By TONY ESCODA

JOLO, Philippines — (AP) A group of American missionaries is working where even Filipino chaplains fear to tread.

The missionaries, 14 Roman Catholic priests of the order of Oblates of Mary Immaculate, look after some 65,000 Catholics in the Philippines' southernmost Sulu islands.

The rest of Sulu's population of 250,000 is made up chiefly of Moslems. Some count banditry and piracy as major occupations.

Though lush and fertile, the region is neglected. Living conditions are poor on the 130 inhabited islands separated by unpatrolled stretches of water.

Oblates Unfazed

None of this seems to faze the Oblates. Many are making careers of their Sulu assignments.

The Rev. Raymond Lacasse, of Woonsocket, R. I., a recent arrival, is spending his first year in an isolated village, learning the native dialect.

"It's easier in a village," he says, "because no one speaks English to you and you just have to pick up the language."

Father Lacasse, 27, hopes to teach later at one of five Oblate center stations.

Bandits Lie in Wait

One of the priests' side jobs is acting as chaplains for national constabulary troopers who police the sprawling archipelago.

"That's really not part of our job," the Rev. Charles Prass, of Cape Girardeau, Mo., points out. "But there haven't been any Philippine army chaplains assigned here. So we've taken it on."

The Oblates move about freely despite the constant threat of a bandit ambush.

"The bandits seem to be afraid of us, either because we're Americans or we're priests or both," Father Lacasse says.

Whichever the reason, Jolo residents agree a person is safe traveling with one of the white-robed priests.