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Bangladesh mourns tribal evangelizing bishop

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MYMENSINGH, Bangladesh -- Retired Bishop Francis A. Gomes, who pioneered evangelization among tribal people in his northeastern Bangladesh diocese, died Feb. 17 following a lengthy illness. He was 79.

Catholics across the country mourned the death of the bishop, who had been seriously ill since his retirement in 2006, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. His health worsened after he became paralyzed following a massive stroke in 2008.

"He was taken to Bangkok for treatment, but doctors informed he wouldn't improve anymore," said Salesian Sister Maria, one of the two nuns who cared for Bishop Gomes.

He was born April 30, 1931, at Rangamatia parish in the Dhaka Archdiocese. He was ordained a diocesan priest in December 1959.

Bishop Gomes pioneered evangelization among tribal people throughout the Mymensingh region and was the first local Bengali priest to work among tribes in the area.

He led Mymensingh to erection as diocese in 1987, and he became the first bishop of the new diocese. Mymensingh had been part of the Dhaka Archdiocese.

"Bishop Francis Gomes is the founder of Mymensingh Diocese and he led tribal Catholics towards today's better socio-economic, cultural and pastoral conditions from a challenging time," Father Simon Haccha, a tribal Garo priest and pastor of Ranikhong parish said:

"He fostered spiritual, educational and infrastructural developments in the diocese with once most backward tribal people. He fought for their rights regarding land and political recognition," Father Haccha said.

In 1971, then a parish priest, Bishop Gomes witnessed the newly declared independent nation of Bangladesh emerge. He watched the formation and swearing-in ceremony of the Bangladesh government in exile in a mango grove a short walk from his parish in Baiddyanathtola, an enclave of what was East Pakistan.

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