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Church leaders assess damage after strong quake in central Philippines

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Bishop Leonardo Medroso of Tagbilaran said the church in central Philippines was still assessing damage after a magnitude 7.1 earthquake left dozens dead.

The bishop, who said the Tuesday quake "was so strong," told the Asian church news portal ucanews.com that Spanish-era churches in the towns of Loon and Carmen collapsed. At least two people were reported trapped inside the Loon church, the bishop added.

Reports said the Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Baclayon, considered one of the oldest churches in the Philippines, was also heavily damaged.

In Cebu City, the earthquake damaged the Basilica Minore de Santo Nino (Basilica of the Holy Child), the oldest church in the Philippines and home to one of the country's most important religious icons.

As the death toll neared 100 and aftershocks continued, Rey Balido, spokesman of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, said, "We are expecting the number of casualties to rise as we continue to receive reports from the field."

Social media users in the Philippines and around the world sent messages to pray for the quake-affected central Philippines known as the Visayas, where Bohol, Cebu and more than a dozen other island provinces are located.

Hundreds of users tweeted messages of prayer for victims of the earthquake using #PrayforVisayas. One message that was being reposted read, "Churches were destroyed because God was busy protecting our homes first before his."

The Philippines forms part of what is known as the Pacific "Ring of Fire," a region vulnerable to frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity.

[Simone Orendain in Manila, Philippines, contributed to this story.]

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