

PHILIPPINES SECOND MOST DANGEROUS PLACE FOR JOURNALISTS

by Hetty Alcuitas

Philippines-Canada Task Force on Human Rights in the Philippines

"On March 24, 2005, the Esperat family was sitting down to... dinner at their home. Around the table was James Esperat, Marlene's son who was 10 years old at that time, Kevin, who was 13, and Marlene's daughter. Her husband was in the other room. A young man walked in. He said: "Good evening, are you Marlene Esperat?" She said, "Yes, I am." He pulled out a gun and shot her in the head." (Excerpt from acceptance speech of Declan Hill, about his piece "Speaking the Truth" which was awarded for best in investigative journalism for radio by the Canadian Association of Journalists.)

Marlene Garcia-Esperat, was a 46 year-old chemist who became an anti-corruption activist and columnist for the Midland Review, a community paper in Central Mindanao. She is only one of the reported 53 cases of journalists killed in the Philippines since current President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo came to power in 2001, according to the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP). The Philippines is now the second most dangerous place for journalists in the world after Iraq, according to Reporters Without Borders.

The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) in the Philippines says most of the journalists killed received death threats and were killed in their homes or near their offices. Most were attacked due to "work-related" motives meaning the attack was made in connection with an issue the journalist was covering.

Before her death, Esperat had filed two dozen graft and corruption cases and other complaints of irregularities against local and national officials before the Ombudsman and other quasi-judicial bodies.

Three men were found guilty on charges of Esperat's murder and sentenced to life imprisonment. Two of the convicted killers said they were approached by intermediaries representing two government officials who had wanted Esperat dead.

On April 18, 2007 during the national election period, Delfin Mallari Jr., correspondent of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and the host of a local radio program and editor of the local paper Ang Dyaryo Natin, along with colleague Johnny Glorioso was shot and wounded in an ambush in Lucena City. Glorioso and Mallari are both officers of the local NUJP chapter. They say the attack on them was likely politically-motivated.

State-sponsored repression of journalists, activists and dissidents

Besides direct killings and other attacks, Philippine media critical of the government also face repression and silencing through libel suits. At one time the First Gentlemen Jose Miguel Arroyo had filed 43 libel suits against journalists. Arroyo has been accused of graft and corruption.

Since 2001, the human rights group Karapatan has documented 869 extra-judicial killings, 180 enforced disappearances over one million forcibly displaced by increasing militarization of communities. Groups like Karapatan say this campaign of state terror is under the framework of the U.S.-led imperialist "war on terror" and the Arroyo regime's counter-insurgency program, Oplan Bantay Laya (Operation Freedom Watch).

On July 15, 2007 the Arroyo government implemented the Human Security Act (HSA) or Anti-terrorism Act. Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye was quoted as saying: "The law's message is clear: If you are armed and kill civilians, you will be prosecuted. If you are a communist terrorist, religious terrorist or even a rogue element of our own police or military, you will be stopped." Under the HSA journalists who the government believes to be "co-mingling" with suspected terrorists can be wire-tapped.

Arroyo's counter-insurgency military plans, Oplan Bantay Laya I and II (Operation Freedom Watch) specifically target not only armed combatants for "extinction" but also civilian members of progressive people's organizations whom the military identifies as "fronts" of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People's Army (NPA) which has been waging an armed rebellion since the late 1960's.

In a leaked military power point presentation entitled, "Knowing the Enemy" progressive media organizations such as the NUJP and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, along with the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines were named as "legal fronts" of the armed communist movement.

Critics warn the open labeling of media and other organizations as "legal fronts" or even as "terrorist" organizations under the new HSA give the police and military the needed leeway to commit more extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances and other human rights violations.

A fact-finding mission of the Philippines-Canada Task Force on Human Rights held in the Philippines in November 2006 found that human rights violations were being committed with impunity. They called for the Canadian government to review and re-direct its some 22 million dollars in development aid to progressive people's organizations addressing the roots of people's poverty.

Meanwhile, journalists and other activist continue to diligently do their work despite the repression and fear.

PHILIPPINES-CANADA TASK FORCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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