

**Written Testimony Submitted by
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Manila, Philippines
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Introduction

I am Bishop Eliezer M. Pascua, General Secretary of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP). I was elected to this office during our 8th Quadrennial Session of our General Assembly held May 2006 in Digos City, Davao del Sur.

However, before my election as General Secretary, I was serving as Jurisdictional Bishop assigned in Southern Luzon Jurisdiction for a total of fourteen years with only two years break (1990-98 then 2000-2006). From 1998-2000 I served as administrative pastor of a local church in College, Los Banos, Laguna. The Southern Luzon Jurisdiction covers the UCCP churches in areas within three political regions, namely, National Capital Region which is mainly Metro Manila area, southern Tagalog and Bicol region.

I have come to the United States of America first, by the invitation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) particularly through the Presbytery of Sacramento in keeping with our church to church partnership and their solidarity with us under the present predicament we and the Filipino people are in especially with respect to the human rights situation, and second, by being a delegate to the Ecumenical Advocacy Days and to the International and Ecumenical Conference on Human Rights Situation in the Philippines which is taking place in Washington DC March 12-14, 2007.

Now, I appear before the hearing of the US Senate Sub-committee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs as a witness to the fact that political or extrajudicial killings are happening in the Philippines and included among numerous victims were church-people, priests, pastors, even bishop and lay leaders working for the church.

Attack Against the Church

Let me inform this body that during our General Assembly in May last year which elected me to the office of General Secretary of the UCCP the delegates passed unanimously a strong resolution condemning the extra-judicial killings being done against human rights activists and church people and calling the office of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to put a stop to it. But coupled with that Resolution was a

mandate that the UCCP hold a Human Rights and Peace Summit in cooperation with partner churches and civil society groups and ecumenical international bodies.

Let it be put on record that at the height of the deliberation on such resolution by the General Assembly, Mr. Noli Capulong, an active lay leader of UCCP- Calamba of the Northeastern Southern Tagalog Conference and spokesperson of Southern Tagalog Environmental Action Movement, was shot dead by two unidentified motorcycle-riding gunmen at around 6:00 pm of May 27, 2006 in Calamba, Laguna (about 45 kms. south of Manila). Noli had long been under military surveillance for his advocacy work for justice, peace, human rights and environmental concerns. And he happened to be the youngest brother of Atty. Emilio Capulong who was the principal author of such resolution and also a staunch defender of human rights himself.

All the more our demand for justice and call for the stopping of political killings and other forms of human rights violations became more intense. We just held the Peace and Human Rights Summit last July 21, 2006 in cooperation with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, the Ecumenical Bishops Forum and the Roman Catholic Benedictine Sisters for Peace. It was participated in by many representatives from various churches and organizations locally and internationally where we invited also some living victims themselves and/or relatives of the killed victims to share about their grim experiences of human rights violations.

I am sharing this story to say that even this trip of mine to the USA is part of that whole advocacy of our church to stop the killings, end the violence and work for and promote change to make current life in the Philippines different from what it is now.

From the year 2001 to the present we came to know that there may already be as high as 836 persons killed extra-legally in the Philippines. The victims actually came from all walks of life, farmers, fisherfolks, workers, indigenous people, Moro people, journalists, lawyers, doctors, teachers, students, young persons, women, and even children. I would like to make particular mention that church people were also not spared.

Among the 836 or so who were killed 26 were church people, clergy and lay persons. The church people killed came from the Philippine Independent Church, United Methodist Church, Born Again Christian Church, United Church of Christ in the Philippines and Roman Catholic Church for many of the lay persons. Out of the 25 church martyrs, 15 belonged to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. That is why we are called the hardest hit among the churches.

With such an appalling death toll of extrajudicial killings in our country at this time of the Arroyo administration, nobody could ever claim that she/he is not afraid and is safe. I admit that I have that fear rather now and later when I go back to the Philippines. How much more with those who have always been there who were close or in proximity with the victims within their household or even in their community when they were assassinated. You can all imagine the chilling effect among the people that this extralegal killings have been causing.

Reportedly, almost all of these cases actually remain unsolved, and that even those cases that the military or police ruled as either the work of the anti-government group or ordinary crimes that they claimed solved, however, remained to be the result of unsatisfactory and unbelievable police crime investigation work.

Example of this was the killing of Bishop Alberto Ramento last October 3, 2006 right inside his convent in Tarlac City. Bishop Ramento was receiving death threats already before he was killed. The Philippine National Police (PNP) report said that Bishop Ramento was stabbed to death by robbers. Simply because Bishop Ramento's cellular phone and ring were discovered stolen after the incident, the PNP was quick to dismiss the case as a simple case of robbery with homicide. But people were in wonderment particularly those who conducted a fact finding mission that the crime scene investigation by the police was perfunctorily and hastily finished in about two hours and thereafter they did not cordon off the crime scene, thus, allowing everyone in.

Apparently no fingerprint was taken during the crime scene investigation because the police report never came up with a fingerprint finding. Except for the sworn statement of the church caretaker, Archimedes Ferer, there was also no interview done on the family and the people close to Bishop Ramento after the crime scene investigation and before the PNP single-mindedly declared it just a few hours after the crime scene investigation that it was a case of robbery with homicide.

A few days after the tragic incident, the Philippine National Police presented four (4) men as suspects in the case. However, according to observers, an analysis of their investigation would reveal questionable results.

In most of the earlier cases of killings, however, the police and military were hastily concluding that the crime was the work of the New People's Army (NPA) or anti-government groups since the assailants usually were unidentified men riding in motorcycles and since no witnesses are willing to testify so the cases just lied there unsolved.

Let me tell you that in virtually all cases of killings of the church people, just like in the rest of the cases, the police and military were always in complete denial of their accountability and responsibility despite there having clear leads or evidence in most cases that apparently point to them. I would like to cite the following cases:

The killing of Rev. Edison Lapuz along with Mr. Alfredo Malinao on May 12, 2005 in Sitio Motor, Barangay Crossing, San Isidro, Leyte (in the major island group of Visayas). Rev. Lapuz was the Conference Minister of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines- North Eastern Leyte Conference, where Mr. Malinao was a village councilor. They were killed pointblank by two motorcycle riding men wearing bonnet masks and helmets right just at the back of Rev. Lapuz' house when they were whiling away some hours after having done the funeral for his father-in-law that afternoon.

But the lead was more on the instances a few days before the incident. Mr. Fortunato Lapuz, father of Edison, reported to the Fact Finding team that Lt. Mangohon, the commanding officer of the local military detachment visited their house several times. On May 1, 2005 Mr. Lapuz was asked whether he knew of Rev. Lapuz' organizational involvements and whether he knew Benito Montecena, Alberto Muring, Benjamin Tumbiga and Fernando Kiling, all members of local small farmers group. Then he was told that Rev. Lapuz and the said farmers were under surveillance by Lt. Mangohon's team. On May 3, 2005 the same Lt. Mangohon returned with another person and requested if they could look into the family album. Mrs. Lapuz who was the only person at the house allowed them to do so. Lt Mangohon , being a soldier well identified as such by Rev. Lapuz' parents is an indispensable person that must be included in the investigation. But until now we don't know of any investigative action that has been done on this Lt. Mangohon if only to find out the real truth.

The assassination of Rev. Jemias Tinambacan and the frustrated killing of his wife, Rev. Marilou Tinambacan is another good case to have a lead for evidence. Rev. Jemias Tinambacan and Marilou are both UCCP Pastors in Misamis Occidental and both are active members as well of ecumenical organizations Ecumenical Center for Development (KASIMBAYAN) and Promotion of Church Peoples' Response (PCPR) . The tragic incident took place on May 9, 2006 at about 5:30 pm along the national highway in Barangay Mobod, Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental in Mindanao. Four armed men on board two motorcycles suddenly appeared on the side of their van and began shooting them.

Rev. Jemias after being hit by those gunshots lost control of the wheel of their van and crashed onto a tree. Rev. Jemias sustained three gunshot wounds at his head while Rev. Marilou luckily, however, was not hit as badly as she was able to hide beneath the dashboard of the van. As the suspects continued firing at the vehicle Rev. Marilou even saw and identified one of them as Orland "Mamay" Guimalan, a known military intelligence agent in their place.

Madame Senator and members of this Sub-committee, friends, I can cite many more of these cases of extrajudicial killings whose perpetrators could have been identified and brought to the bar of justice if the authorities and our government would make the force and order of law to operate.

You may also have been asking in your mind at this point why these church- people are being killed. I tell you they were killed not merely because of the church where they belong to. But more so because they have been actively involved in doing their task as servants of God. Their expression of faith is not confined within the four walls of the church but extend among the people in their community. They were like modern day prophets whose commitment and service to God is seriously being carried out in journey with the poor people in their struggle for abundant life. And because of this, their names are being listed down under the military's Order of Battle as presented in their CD entitled Knowing the Enemy.

Concluding Remarks

But so long as our government and the police and military would always look at the whole country and particularly the restless and critical citizens as a battlefield for their counter-insurgency and war on terror, political killings, enforced disappearances and other forms of human rights abuses shall not be abated.

And so long as the government and the military would continue to be in complete denial of their responsibility of any degree to any of these innocent lives that have been sacrificed unnecessarily there is no way that we could force them to stop the killings. Their sense of impunity had reached to a point like having the “hardened heart of Pharaoh” in the Exodus story. #

