



International
Federation
of Journalists
(IFJ)



National Union of
Journalists of the
Philippines
(NUJP)

International Solidarity Mission to the Philippines in response to the Ampatuan Town Massacre

December 6-10 2009

Preliminary Report

An International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) emergency mission organised at the request of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), has been investigating the Ampatuan Town Massacre that took place in provincial Maguindanao on November 23, 2009. Of at least 57 people slain in the massacre, 31 were journalists and media workers.

The delegation comprises representatives from leading journalists' rights and press freedom organisations including the IFJ, the Southeast Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA), the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Indonesia's Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), Australia's Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance, the Thai Journalists' Association (TJA), International News Safety Institute (INSI), International Media Support (IMS), the Institute for Studies on the Free Flow of Information (ISAI) and Union Network International (UNI). The mission is an expression of global solidarity with our journalist colleagues in the Philippines.

The mission visited General Santos City and Manila to meet the families of victims, the local media community, lawyers and government authorities and officials.

The mission has taken into account the findings of an independent fact-finding report prepared by the NUJP with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), news organisation Mindanews, and members of the Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists (FFFJ), in the immediate aftermath of the massacre two weeks ago.

This preliminary report pertains mainly to the media victims of the massacre, their families, and the journalists who continue to risk their lives in the Philippines.

Mission preliminary findings and recommendations:

The mission has identified three key areas and produced recommendations for each:

Families of the victims

Trauma Counseling

Families of the victims are in urgent need of a professionally handled, carefully crafted trauma counseling program. The target groups must include widows, children, parents and immediate family members.

Legal assistance

Given the undue delays plaguing the State prosecution process, the families are considering alternative legal means in seeking justice such as filing individual or collective damage claim cases. They urgently need technical legal assistance drawing on local and international legal expertise to both prosecute these cases and to bring pressure on the government to expedite its own procedures.



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Financial Support

The families of all victims are in need of immediate financial support as well as follow-up assistance to help generate a sustainable income and assistance in finding employment.

The mission welcomes the NUJP's intention to extend the scholarship program for the children of slain journalists - now running for five years - to address the needs of at least 75 children and dependents of the massacre victims.

Safety of the families

A safety assessment for each family must be undertaken and appropriate measures taken to ensure their ongoing security.

Judicial issues

The mission's findings

Witnesses and relatives of the victims strongly believe the military did not take necessary steps to prevent the massacre.

The mission has been told of fears that the investigation process has been flawed from the beginning. There are fears the crime scene was compromised, that forensic evidence was contaminated and the physical examination of the area was cut short due to security concerns and resourcing issues.

Many of the key players, from the investigators, prosecutors, lawyers and judges to the key witnesses are in danger, with some demanding an increase in personal protection in order to stay safe during the investigation and trial process.

The mission notes the imposition of martial law and also the concerns expressed by various groups that this could give rise to massive human rights abuses.

Analysis

The prosecution of the perpetrators of the mass murder will be one of the largest legal cases ever mounted in the Philippines history, yet even this early in the process the families of the massacre victims are struggling to get the most basic documentation from government authorities.

To ensure an open and transparent investigation and trial, sustained and determined pressure from international human rights groups will be vital. Comprehensive monitoring of the trial(s) is also essential to ensure due process is maintained. The NUJP, together with other groups, has already petitioned to have the trial relocated to Manila. The government should also consider establishing a special court that deals just with this massacre.

It is also important to note that the government is responsible for providing effective and adequate victim's compensation. The government must also ensure that the culture of impunity ends by prosecuting those who seek to silence the media by murdering journalists.

Journalism in the Philippines

The massacre is the culmination of decades of government inaction on the killing of journalists. It underlines the terrible dangers that Filipino journalists face. It also highlights the inability and unwillingness of the State to ensure the protection and safety of journalists who are merely seeking to perform their duties. This massacre, coming at the very beginning of the 2010 election process, not only undermines that process but has dealt a cruel blow to democracy and free media in the Philippines.



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Trauma counseling and protection

There is an immediate need for trauma counseling for journalists, particularly those working in Mindanao who have lost so many colleagues. Those who were witness to the events of November 23 are also in urgent need of a safe haven, either through witness protection programs or other strategies.

Safety office

A regional safety office must be established in Mindanao well before the May 2010 election in order to provide safety training and support for journalists covering the campaign.

The office would also seek to monitor the effect of the massacre on reportage in the region as well as the ongoing threats to journalists' safety that continue to be received with chilling regularity.

International obligations and actions

The mission reminds the Government of the Philippines of its commitment to international agreements and obligations such as the Geneva Conventions, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and lately the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1738 (2006) which states that journalists, media professionals and associated personnel engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered civilians, to be respected and protected as such.

The UN Security Council has strongly condemned frequent acts of violence, including deliberate attacks, in many parts of the world against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel and has called on all parties to put an end to such practices.

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