



2 November, 2015

Mr Benigno Aquino III
President of the Philippines
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CC:

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H.E. Ms Lourdes O. Yparraguirre – Philippines Representative to the United Nations -

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Subject: Protecting the media community against the Philippine’s culture of impunity

Dear President Benigno Aquino III,

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its global affiliates including the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) intend to bring your attention to the very serious issues of impunity against the working journalists in the Philippines, today on the UN International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists.

Over the past two and a half decades, the Philippines has consistently been ranked one of the most dangerous places on the planet to practice journalism. Wanton targeting of journalists, including verbal and written threats, physical attacks, kidnappings and killings have been alarmingly high in the Philippines.

Over 40 have been killed in the last six years and more than 180 since 1980. This year, seven journalists have already been killed, making the Philippines the deadliest country in the Asia Pacific region.

This year, we have witnessed the brutal attacks on journalists and media workers across the country, including that of Maurito Lim who was shot and killed as he got out of his vehicle at his office in Tagbilaran City, and the murder of Gregorio Ybanez who was shot three times out the front of his house in Tagum City, following death threats he received in 2012.

Yet, the most devastating death this year was that of veteran journalist, Alberto ‘Pastor’ Martinez, who passed away in January this year, ten years after a failed assassination attempt left him paralysed and his family in witness protection. Martinez was able to name those responsible for this attempted murder, and yet they remain free.

These killings provide a small insight into the tragic safety situation facing journalists across the Philippines. But perhaps the most disturbing fact is the unending violence against journalists and the high level of impunity that surrounds them. Throughout 2015, journalists and media workers have been threatened, intimidated and attacked.

But the statistics of 2015 are dwarfed by the continuing injustice for the 58 people, including 32 journalists who were brutally slain on November 23, 2009 in the single deadliest attack on press freedom and journalists in the world.



The attack on journalists and press freedom have become entrenched in Philippines society, with the country frequently noted as one of, if not the most dangerous country for journalists globally.

The establishment of Task Force Usig to combat impunity for crimes against journalists and investigate the murders, including the Ampatuan Massacre was an opportunity for your government to take a stand against the growing trend across the Philippines. Yet the Task Force has failed in its objective. According to your Justice Department there are 84 suspects in the Ampatuan Massacre at large, however Task Force Usig quotes only 77. According to Task Force Usig's figure of 77, five are members of the Philippine National Police (PNP), four are members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and 53 are members of the government-subsidised paramilitary Civilian Volunteer Organisations (CVOs). These suspects are on the government payroll and yet your own government cannot find and arrest them.

More illustrative of the failures of Task Force Usig is the slow pace of the court case against the 193 accused in the Ampatuan Massacre. On November 23, we will mark six years since the massacre, and to date not a single person has been convicted for the crime. Even more worrying is the failure to protect witnesses in the trial, to date four witnesses have been killed, with one as recently as November 2014.

The Philippines was one of the first member-states of the United Nations, yet the failure to protect journalists and their safety is an endemic failure on the country's commitments to International Conventions. The Philippines, as a member-state of the United Nations, is a signatory of the following UN Resolutions which protect journalists: UN Resolution 29 'Condemnation of violence against journalists', UN Resolution 1738 (2006) on Attacks against Journalists in Conflict Situations, UN Human Rights Council Resolution 21/12 on the Safety of Journalists, UN Resolution 52 on online safety and UN Resolution 2222 (2015) on Protection of Journalists. These Resolutions, except UN Resolution 2222, were already in place prior to the Ampatuan Massacre and yet 32 journalists were brutally slain.

To mark the fifth anniversary of the Ampatuan Massacre in November 2014, the IFJ and NUJP led a mission to the Philippines to demand action on investigations and to bring those responsible to justice. The IFJ-NUJP mission met with a number of government representatives including, Undersecretary for Legislative, Policy and Legal Affairs Jess Anthony Q. Yu of the Presidential Communications Operations Office, and then Department of Justice's Secretary Leila de Lima, and raised many issues. Following the IFJ-NUJP mission, the report *Ampatuan Massacre: Five Years On* was published and included key recommendations for your government to ensure such a massacre never happens again.

The IFJ and NUJP call on your government to review the recommendations below and ensure they are met to guarantee the safety and security of the Philippine media:

1. President Aquino and his administration to publicly condemn all acts of violence against media workers. Such action would demonstrate the Philippines' commitment to press freedom and its international human rights obligations to protect press workers.
2. Promote the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill, promised by President Aquino during his election campaign. This would address the issue of impunity by providing greater media access to official documents.
3. Recognise November 23 as a national day of media freedom in remembrance of the journalists' lives lost in the Philippines and help promote the role of the media as a vital arm of democracy.

4. Mark November 2, the UN-declared International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, in accordance with the UN decree.
5. Establish and implement programs outlined under the UN Action Plan on Security of Journalists and Issues of Impunity and report as requested by UNESCO's director-general. This information to be released to the international community each year on November 2.
6. Commit to provide ongoing financial support to the families of the victims of the Ampatuan Massacre; compensate them for the significant impacts of the length of the trial and for the actions of agents of the state in the massacre, ensure the families are free from any external pressure or bribes.
7. Revoke Executive Orders 546 which allows local officials to arm members of Civilian Volunteer Organisations (CVOs).
8. Provide sufficient recourses and political support to ensure that authorities conduct exhaustive and timely investigations and trials relating to crimes against journalists.

The IFJ and NUJP urge your Excellency and the Government of the Philippines to reaffirm your commitments to freedom of expression and the protection of journalists and accept these representative demands from the largest community of Philippine journalists who are facing extensive harassment and intimidation often characterised by extreme violence.

The Philippines' poor record on journalism safety needs immediate action from your Government. Enshrined in the Philippines' Constitution is the right to freedom of expression, privacy and the right to information, all of which are compromised by the culture of impunity that is rife across the country.

We thank you in anticipation of proactive police and procedural support and offer any assistance that can help in this regard and promote a safer environment for journalists in the Philippines.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Anthony BELLANGER'.

Anthony Bellanger
General Secretary
International Federation of Journalists

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Jane Worthington'.

Jane Worthington,
Director, Program and Development
IFJ Asia Pacific