



## **REPORT OF THE LIVING LETTERS TEAM VISIT TO THE PHILIPPINES**

### **Ominous Sign of Human Rights Situation in the Philippines**

**1-5 December 2010**

*"You show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us,  
written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God,  
not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."*

*(2 Corinthians 3:3, RSV)*

Living Letters are small ecumenical teams visiting a country to listen, learn, share approaches and challenges in overcoming violence and in peace making, and to pray together for peace in the community and in the world. A team consists of 4 - 6 women and men from around the world who have witnessed violence in its various forms and are engaged in working for just peace. A Living Letters team will be successful when those visited can affirm "we are not alone!", and when team members feel they have received much from those who they visited to encourage.

#### **Members of the team:**

-  **Mr Tony Waworuntu**, former member of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), Indonesia
-  **Ms Mardi Tindal**, Moderator, United Church of Canada
-  **Rev. Dr Dan Sandu**, WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), Romania
-  **Ms Aneth Lwakatere**, intern, WCC communication programme, Tanzania
-  **Ms Anastasia Dragan**, intern, WCC youth programme, Republic of Moldova
-  **Rev. Tara Curlewis**, General Secretary, National Council of Churches in Australia
-  **Ms Semegnish Asfaw**, WCC Coordinator of the Living Letters visits, Ethiopia
-  **Ms Vijula Arulanantham**, Christian Conference of Asia, Sri Lanka

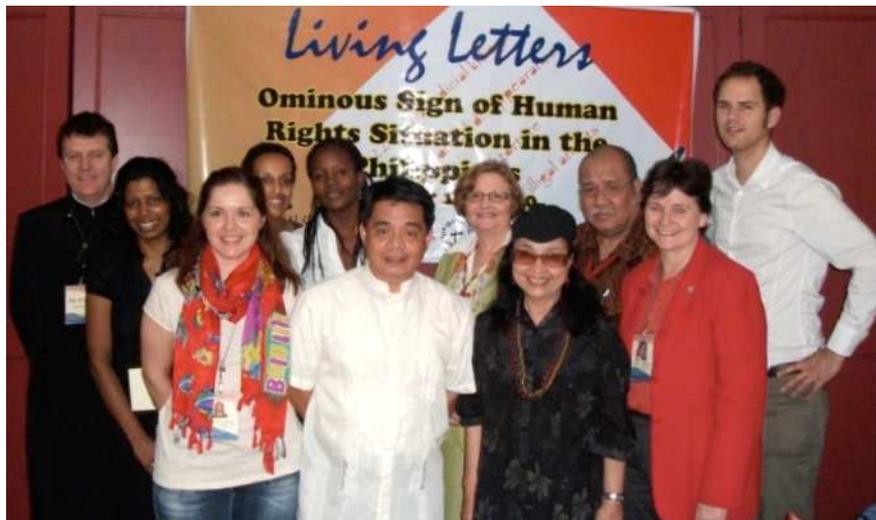
#### **Local delegates:**

-  **Fr Rex Reyes**, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines
-  **Ms Carmencita Karagdag-Peralta**, WCC Central Committee member from the Philippines



### **Words of thanks to our hosts**

We are grateful to the National Council of Churches of the Philippines (NCCP) for their dedication in the preparation of the programme of the visit, as well as for taking care of all our needs. Our heartfelt appreciation goes particularly to Fr Rex Reyes, General Secretary of NCCP, who coordinated our visit and accompanied us during the visit, together with Central committee member Ms Carmencita Karagdag. Fr Rex helped us understand the context by regularly interpreting for us what we were seeing and hearing. Our gratitude also goes to all the people whom we met in the places we visited. It was a humbling experience to see and live their courage, compassion, dedication and commitment to the people they work with. Everywhere we were given time and the people we met with were kind enough to answer our many questions.



Members of the WCC Living Letters Team Photo WCC/ NCCP Staff





## **I - BACKGROUND**

The Philippine Archipelago is composed of 7,107 islands. Most of these islands are volcanic in origin. The archipelago has three major islands - Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Its capital is Manila and is located in the island of Luzon.

The Philippines is dubbed as one of the main "Christian" nation in Southeast Asia. About 90% of Filipinos are Christian. The other 10% are divided into other faiths including Islam, Buddhism, nature worshippers, etc. The official language is Filipino, which is a derivative of Tagalog. Tagalog is widely spoken in Central Luzon, Manila and South Luzon. Other major languages spoken are Cebuano, Ilokano, Hiligaynon or Ilonggo, Bicol, Waray, and Pampango.

The Philippines is also home to a number of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) whose ancestral domains are scattered all over the archipelago, each with their own tradition, culture and language. There are a total of 52 indigenous groups. Some of the indigenous peoples (IP) found in the Northern part of the Philippines are the Ifugao, Bontoc, Kalinga, Isneg, Ibaloy and Tingian. The Igorot are found in the Cordilleras in Northern Luzon. Some IPs in Central and Southern Luzon are the Agta/Dumagat, Batangan, Hanunuo and Remontado. In Negros and Panay Islands in the Visayas region are the Ati, Akeanon and the Tumanduk. Some of the IPs found in Mindanao generally called Lumad are the Teduray T'Boli, B'laan, Bagobo and Mandaya.

The Philippines is a democratic and republican State with a constitutional, representative, accountable and presidential form of government. The national normative framework for human rights protection consists of the Constitution, legislation, court decisions or jurisprudence, and customs and traditional practices.

The Constitution provides for the three major branches of Government:

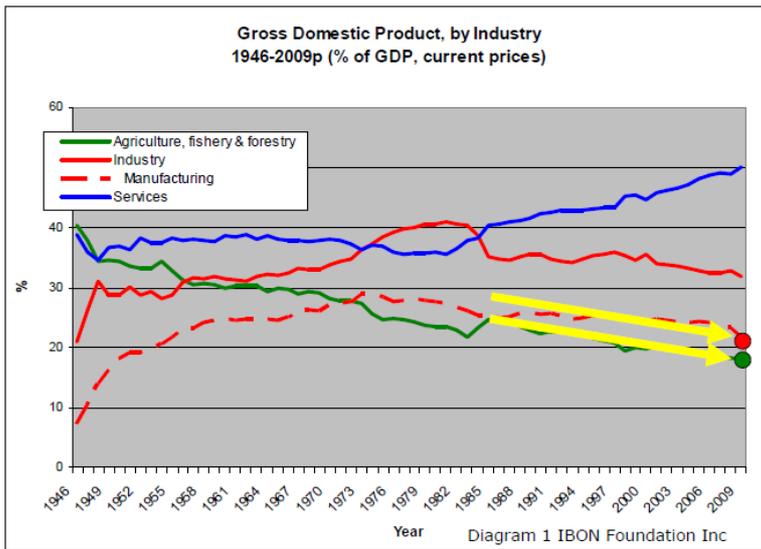
1. the Executive headed by a President, assisted by the Vice-President,
2. The legislative branch employs the bi-cameral system: known as the congress, it is composed of two separate chambers, the House of Representatives (lower house) and the Senate (upper house).
3. The Judiciary with highest court in the land being the Supreme Court headed by a Chief Justice and 12 other justices.

### **Socio-Economic Setting**

The Philippines faces many challenges including tens of millions in chronic poverty, extremes of social inequality, a recurring fiscal emergency, eroded long-term economic viability amid a still unfolding global financial crisis.



Many years of globalisation effects have seen economic results with greater trade and foreign investment accompanied by rapid growth. Also associated with globalisation is anti-developmental outcomes displaying economic decline, increasing unemployment, growing poverty and severe inequality.



Currently the economy is in a state of decline with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in manufacturing (21.8%) being as small as in the 1950s and agriculture (18.1%) at its smallest in the country's recorded history.

The population of 94 million people are experiencing an increasing unemployment rate<sup>1</sup>: 11.2% in April 2010, along with increasing poverty - 66 million poor people i.e. 70% of the population live on less than US\$1.95 per day. However Filipinos in the poorest 10 % of the population live only on 18 peso (US\$0.40) per day. Severe and widening social inequalities are present with the net worth of the 20 richest Filipino families being \$20.4 billion which is equivalent to the combined yearly income of the poorest 11,000,000 families (approximately 55,000,000+ Filipinos).

Massive migration is also being experienced with over 3,900 people leaving the country every day; only a small percentage returns back to the Philippines. Currently approximately 9 million Filipinos live abroad supporting the Filipino economy through regular financial contributions to family members. These remittances have a significant role in family incomes, welfare and consumption but contribute little to boosting the domestic economic production.

### Provision of Health Services

The trends towards privatisation of services have resulted in services not being accessible to many Filipinos. In health care there are only 13 hospital beds for every 10,000 people, and one government doctor and seven government nurses and midwives for every 30,000

<sup>1</sup> The criteria used to classify a person as employed is if they work one hour per week



people. This is ironic for a country that is the biggest exporter of nurses and second biggest exporter of doctors in the world. Around 70% of nursing graduates and 68% of Filipino doctors work abroad.

### **Political Setting**

The Philippines is in an oligarchy situation and nepotism is exhibited as several members of the same family belong to the Congress.

There is a militaristic approach to armed conflicts in general.

- *2001 National Internal Security Plan (NISP), National Military Strategy (NMS), Oplan Bantay Laya 1 & 2*
- *Erratic peace talks with Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)-New Peoples Army (NPA)- National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)*
- *US military aid (2001-11): US\$427 million up to est. US\$1.3 billion; helicopters, aircraft, ships, boats, trucks, rifles, helmets, vests...*

There are also strong political repression and human rights violations since 2001 including 1,206 extrajudicial killings, frustrated killings, abductions, 206 enforced disappearances and 356 political prisoners.

There is a chronic domestic human rights crisis with a bloody human rights track record through the implementation of the Counter-Insurgency program. Many perceive this as State Terrorism as several hundred have lost their lives since 2001.

*“Cases of extra-judicial killings need to be solved, not just identify the perpetrator but have them captured and sent to jail.” (Presidential candidate Benigno “Noyoy” Aquino during the meeting with EU ambassadors 21 March 2010)*

*“There can be no reconciliation without justice. When we allow crimes to go unpunished, we give consent to their occurring over and over again.” (Inaugural Address of His Excellency BENIGNO S. AQUINO III President of the Philippines 30 June 2010).*

However extra-judicial killings still occur and no investigations have taken place yet. Impunity still goes on as no perpetrators have been apprehended.



## **II- THE LIVING LETTERS EXPERIENCE**

### **1. Overview of Human Rights in the Philippines**

The Constitution of the Philippines states;

*“The State values the dignity of every human person and guarantees full respect for human rights” (Art. II, Section 11).*

and

*“The Congress shall give highest priority to the enactment of measures that protect and enhance the right of all the people to human dignity, reduce social, economic and political inequalities, and remove cultural inequities by equitably diffusing wealth and political power for the common good. (Article XIII, Section 1)”*

As part of the overview the Living Letters team met with Marie Hilao-Enriquez, the chairperson of the human rights group Karapatan (Alliance for the Advancement of People’s Rights), added: “Comparing the human rights situation we had in the past nine years, up to 2009, and the current state of affairs, nothing has really changed.”

Extra-judicial killings, “frustrated” killings<sup>2</sup>, forced disappearances, abduction and other forms of human rights violence still remain the biggest threats in the Philippines.

Despite all the challenges that human rights advocacy organizations face in the Philippines, Hilao-Enriquez pointed to the cooperation of the NCCP as a positive factor, as well as the efforts by all its member churches in promoting respect for human rights.

We heard that in the last six months of the Arroyo Government there were:

-  18 people killed
-  1 enforced disappearance.

Whilst in the first four months of the new Aquino Government:

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<sup>2</sup> Term used to refer to attempted killings, i.e. people who survived an attempt to their life



Type of Violation	No. of Victims
Extrajudicial killing	20
Frustrated killing	4
Enforced or involuntary disappearance	2
Torture	16
Illegal arrest	29
Threat, harassment and intimidation	3,280
Forcible evacuation and displacement	896
Use of schools, medical, religious and other public places for military purposes	754

Table 1 © Karapatan 2010 Year End Report

## 2. Personal Testimonies from Victims and Relatives of Human Rights Violations

### Muslim Lady

Z came from Mindanao to Manila to look for work and also to try to emigrate abroad. Her cousin, who came along with her, got arrested on 4 November 2010: he was accused of being involved with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) that perpetrated the 2001 kidnapping of two Americans, Martin and Grace Burnham.

In 2001, her cousin was only 11 years-old. How could he possibly be part of a kidnapping? He is currently detained, and is waiting to trial on 5 January 2011. After being arrested in Manila, he was detained in Camp Crame. Then, he was flown back to Basilan.

In general, people from the Muslim community are afraid to be targeted by such unfounded and illegal arrests. All they ask is to live a simple and decent life, nothing more.

Z contacted the Commission on Human Rights who expressed their inability to help her as the cousin is now in an area some distance away. In addition to that, they explained that his involvement with the kidnapping cannot be simply ruled out because of his age, as he could have helped to carry ammunitions.



### **Brother of a Pastor**

J is from Southern Luzon. He is the brother of Pastor I, from the Methodist Church. On 3 August 2006 evening, 5 gunned men wearing masks broke in their house and asked for Pastor I. They took all phones, keys they could find in so that no one can look for help. They also turned off the light so as not to be seen from outside. The men dragged J out of the house and interrogated him; he was hit with their gun. Finally, J took the masked men to his brother's house. When his sister-in-law opened the door, they got in the house quickly, tied Pastor I's hands behind his back and started to beat him. They took him to the bedroom and continued the beating. J said "We could hear from the other room Pastor I begging for mercy". Then, they all left. "As soon as they were out, we ran out to call for help. That's when we heard gun shots in the back of the house". Pastor I was found there with 6 impacts of bullets in his body. Next to him, another body with a mask on the face was lying on the floor. When they looked at his papers, they saw he was a Corporal from the military.

Pastor I was accused of being part of the New People's Army (NPA), which was not the case in reality. He was just an activist.

### **Mother of an abducted son**

Her son was abducted on 7 November 2006. 4 soldiers forcibly entered in their house and asked for her daughter who is an activist. Since they could not find her, they searched the whole house, and finally threw her on the floor threatening her to tell them where her daughter was. They then took her to her son's place, and asked him where his sister was. When he replied that he did not know where to find her, they gave him a severe beating. In the end, they took the son instead of the daughter.

The following days, the mother looked for her son in various camps, but in vain. A case was filed, but has been dismissed twice. The mother continued attempts to trace her son in various camps, but until today, there is no sign of him.

The victims would like to send an appeal to the international community in the name of all who were affected by these abductions.

### **Mother of son subjected to violence and harassment**

In May 2010 the Military came to her village to observe the election proceedings. After the election they remained and began recruiting youth for Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU) a paramilitary group under the armed forces. "As a mother I did not agree as my son is still a minor." When we did not agree about the recruitment the military began harassing most of my family" They also summoned A's other children who are aged 11 and 13 years old. They began interrogating the children about why they did not agree to join or why they disliked the military.



On August 28<sup>th</sup> a youth activity was organised to entice the young men to join. N, a 17 year old, was invited on an outing around 10.30 pm when everyone had been drinking A's son mistakenly entered an unmarked rest room to discover it was for ladies rather than for men. He was embarrassed, immediately covered his eyes and left hastily. The military accused N of sexual harassment and then started beating him. Three soldiers took him in a room and continued beating him the son told A that the beating was so intense that they beat him in the head and stomach only stopping when the village watchmen arrived. They also told the boy that he was not to tell anyone of what happened because if he did his family would also be harassed by the military,

After these acts of violence his behaviour changed and became unusual like wearing sunglasses at night and drawing maps for the military. After this unusual behaviour began he started complaining about serious pain and asked "what have they done to my body?" he started to become violent threatening his mother with a knife. At this time N's mother was able to take him to a doctor, later her son was diagnosed as being schizophrenic. The condition triggered by the physical abuse. N has been hospitalised for several weeks to stabilise his condition now N requires expensive medication to maintain stability.

This family has resisted the approaches of the military and have subsequently experienced acts of harassment, constant surveillance of their house and other acts of intimidation by members of the military. They have been accused of being sympathisers of the New Peoples Army (NPA). She told them "This is not true as we are Jehovah Witnesses." A told the Living Letters Team "My son is not the only one to be harassed there are other young people as well".

This family is unable to return to their own home and are supported by Karapatan and church agencies. Other youth in the area have also been traumatised by action of members of the military.

Some members of the military have embraced behaviour where they exercise the abuse of power and intimidate those they are there to protect.

### **Son of abducted man**

A young man shared the experience of his family in Basilan in the southern Philippines. The majority in this area are Muslim, because of their faith they have been associated with terrorism. A told us "In 2001 there was a military crack down in our area". My father was arrested along with 72 other people on July 13 2001." The group was arrested by people dressed in civilian clothing. When he confronted one of the arresting persons he was also arrested as was his uncle. These men were interrogated and tortured to extract their signature on a blank sheet of paper. The arresting men said "because you are Muslim you must sign your name otherwise you will be detained." They were taken to a military camp and the father was beaten. The Father signed the document to spare his son and the uncle



of anything further. The uncle and the son were released but the father was transferred to a military camp and then later to Camp Bagong Diwa

The father was accused of kidnapping. Eventually the court dismissed the charges and he was released. The case was dismissed in 2003. After the acquittal and before his father was released the military filed another charge. Prior to all this his father was a fisherman.

After his release he was next accused of participating in the Grecia Graham kidnapping in Dos Palmos. Grecia was able to identify her captures and he was not one. In 2005 he was acquitted and finally released from detention. Then whilst attending prayer in the mosque he was abducted by a man on a motor cycle.

The family searched military camps for the father and eventually located him. He exhibited the signs of much physical abuse and torture. A photographic record of his condition was recorded by staff of the Human Rights Commission.

Today this man is detained at Camp Bagong Diwa, the Commission for Human Rights ordered that the arrest and detention as illegal. The family has sought support and sanctuary from church agencies as they fear more acts of abuse and harassment if they return to their home.

### **United Church of Christ of the Philippines Pastor**

UCCP Pastor E is a member of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ of the Philippines was initially accused of murder he was subsequently cleared of all charges by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI). After his release his home continued to be placed under constant surveillance. Then in January 2010 he was abducted and interrogated for one hour then returned to his home with the warning not to speak of his experience. This Pastor was previously a Human Rights advocate in the church. The sanctuary he has received from the NCCP and the church agencies giving a small sense of normality to his life. He appreciates the support from a partner church the Uniting Church in Australia at this time and longs for the day when he can again answer his vocational call and freely exercise ministry.

Towards the end of the session, members of the Living Letters team were asked an emotional question: From what you have heard, is there any hope? The Rev. Dr Dan Sandu answered on behalf of the whole Living Letters delegation: "There is hope, and more hope if we love our neighbours as we are supposed to. Yes, there is hope."

### **Relatives of the Morong 43**

#### *Listening to a Wife then a Mother*

We listened to a wife concerning the arrest and detainment of her husband. During her



sharing about her husband she became anxious and overwhelmed unable to speak. Her grief was exhibited both emotionally and by anxiety producing physical discomfort shortness of breath and her becoming very distressed. She wanted to tell her story but was unable to articulate it. We assured her that we understood her pain and she did not need to say anything additional.

After a pause to comfort the distressed wife, another woman shared her story concerning her young daughter. The daughter had wanted to assist others so became a community health worker and was participating in the Community First Respondents' Health Training sponsored jointly by the Community Medicine Development Foundation (COMMED) and the Council for Health and Development (CHD). The training was being held at a residential compound in Morong, Rizal.

On 6 February 2010 at 6.15 am joint elements of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade of the Philippine Army and the Rizal Provincial Police (PNP) raided the compound of Dr Velmonte, chairperson of COMMED's Board of Directors.

Among the arrested health care workers were 2 doctors, 1 registered nurse, 2 mid wives and 38 volunteer community health workers ranging in age from 19-62. They have been accused of undergoing training in bomb-making and are members of the New People's Army. It is claimed that firearms and explosives were found in the accommodation area. The search was conducted without the presence of either the owner or independent witnesses.

After their arrest they were taken to a military prison where they were denied the right to counsel and were not informed until the second day of the reason for their detention. There were several accounts of torture and ill-treatment. These have been attested to by the detainees and the Commission on Human Rights.

We heard how in the early days of detention they were subjected to harassment, prolonged interrogation with death threats, deprived sleep and essential medications. Some were coerced to wrongly make admissions and implicate others. After a time 38 were transferred to a civilian detention centre. Five still remain under military detention.

This young woman suffers from a health condition her self and requires medication. Her mother expressed her great concern for how her daughter was coping in detention.

### **3. Exposure Visits**

#### ***3.1 Visit to Cojuangco Hacienda Luisita, Tarlac***

Group 1 of the Living Letters team visited the Hacienda Luisita community. They were received by farmers who have been struggling for land rights for the past fifty years. This is the story they shared with us.

Hacienda Luisita is in the central plains of Luzon and has been owned and controlled by the



powerful Cojuangco family to which the current President Benigno Cojuangco Aquino III belongs. The Hacienda Luisita comprises of 6,435 ha of sugar cane plantations. Although when the Cojuangco family took over the land in 1957 it was on the basis of giving back the land to the farmers after a period of 10 years, it has not been done to date.

The farmers are compelled to work in the sugar mill and are paid a paltry sum of 9.5 Filipino pesos a day, on top of which they are given work only one day per week. This has serious impact on their families and their livelihoods. As a result of this, the farmers have had to organise themselves to present a common voice against the politically and economically influential and powerful Cojuangco family to ask for better wages and regular work. Not only their demand was rejected, but also more than 300 farmers were retrenched, thus intensifying the misery. The Cojuangco family continued avoiding to obey orders from the government to distribute the land to the farmers.

Consequently, this ended up in the historical general strike of 2004 where the farmers united in peaceful protest about the injustices committed against them. The protest which began on 6 November 2004 saw about 5,000 farmers of the area and many other sympathisers from other parts of the country join the protest. The protesters managed to foil all attempts by the police and the military to disperse them until 16 November 2004 when the military used gun power killing 7 farmers and wounding more than 100 others. During 2005 and 2006 six more farmers were killed.



Entrance to Hacienda  
Luisita Community  
Photo WCC Staff

Up to now, no one has been brought to justice for these extra-judicial killings. There has been no change to the farmers' wages or working conditions. In 2006, the Agrarian Reforms Council ruled in favour of the farmers and the Cojuangco obtained a restraining order from the Supreme Court against this ruling; the farmers petitioned the Supreme Court, and the decision is still pending 4 years later.

In the face of this stagnating situation, the farmers are engaged in collective farming called "Bungkalan" and have taken the initiative to convert some part of this land into rice, banana and corn fields. This is an important step in establishing their right to a decent livelihood. In the face of all this adversity, the determination, bravery, oneness and resilience of the farmers is admirable, particularly the women who are the back bone of this community. Their story is a living testimony of hope in the midst of hopelessness.

In addition to their current struggle for a decent livelihood the farmers shared with us concern about the heavy military presence in the area, including that of foreign forces. This has resulted in the limitation of their right to assemble freely. They are not allowed to meet in public spaces or places where community gatherings would normally be held. These farmers are under constant surveillance resulting in them living in constant fear, as they are constantly harassed, oppressed and interrogated by militiamen or CAFGU that were recruited by the military.





a defective search warrant then the consequent effects should also be null and void.... That is the correct legal position.” The President also recognised that there is a case before the RTC therefore that process needs to be completed.

Secretary de Lima expressed a hope that meaningful action is executed in time for the International Human Rights Day and if not then by the year end. She stated “As a human rights advocate this is a terrible thing.”

The conversation heard that the Secretary had instructed the military that the mother and daughter needed to be remain in the hospital rather than in the detention centre.

The delegation raised concern around extra-judicial killings that have continued since the inauguration of the new administration. Initially there were 6 reported extra-judicial killings were immediately acted at the instruction of the President. Five of the six initially reported the investigation identified the perpetrators and arrest warrants were issued. Some of these people are still at large.

Currently a proposal being provided to the President is to revitalise the taskforce 211 as a special task force of the Dept of Justice using the mandate of the task force and strengthen its composition to closely monitor extra-judicial killings. It will review all cases including the cold cases and pursue those with evidence so that the culture of impunity can be addressed. Secretary de Lima acknowledged “a culture of impunity exists because too few people are being brought to justice.” Only six or seven convictions have been made concerning extra-judicial killings since 2001 because some of the cases are not being given proper attention as well as the scarcity of witnesses in some cases. “A higher conviction rate is part of the way of breaking the culture of impunity” de Lima said.

Steps to overcome the military abuse of human rights have been taken to strengthen the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) human rights office ensuring that officers and soldiers are trained in human rights standards.

When asked how the international community could support the Philippines to bring about change, the Secretary identified the following:

1. Dialogues or occasional discussions with international delegations
2. training of the security forces recognising that there are some limitations of accepting support
3. criticisms are welcome if we are remiss in our duties or mandate
4. express concerns and statements through international forum, i.e. the United Nations and other bodies
5. Call our attention to concerns expressing them through the Department of Foreign Affairs or direct to the Office of the President and the Department of Justice.

The delegation asked for the response to the UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston recognising that counter-insurgency programmes as being integral to extra-judicial killings, and heard that the administration is reviewing the situation of the Counter-Insurgency



programme; the planned Oplan Bantay Laya (OBL) is being removed and a new national security policy and strategy being developed. A new plan should be announced in early 2011. The Living Letters delegation was encouraged to hear of the steps being taken in the peace process. Secretary de Lima said “You can not win peace if a counter-insurgency programme is misplaced or does not espouse the right thing.”

The Living Letters delegation appreciated the open and frank conversation that took place with Secretary de Lima.

### **3.4 Visiting with the Morong 43**

#### **3.4.1 in Detention**

Group two travelled to the Detention receiving a briefing of possible scenarios once arriving at Camp Bagong Diwa, these included being refused entry at the entrance gate to being subjected to varying levels of search prior to entry to the detention centre.

First we visited the male community health workers. After completing identification checks and security searches we were taken to the area where the cells are. As we entered this area we noticed a large number of Muslim men praying in a very confined space.

We were ushered into an open cell with benches where we waited the arrival of the community health workers. Each was dressed in shorts and a mandatory yellow t-shirt. As they entered the small cell we quickly realised that each one showed signs of post traumatic stress. They were also subdued. They were pleased for us to visit as it offered and welcomed the greetings we brought from family members we had spoken with.



Camp Bagong Diwa  
Photo NCCP Staff

After we shared something about our visit with Secretary de Lima and her hope of a positive outcome in their case in the coming weeks, we then talked more generally about their circumstances and the conditions of detention.

Several times we heard “Justice delayed is justice denied”.

They also shared their motivation to enter a hunger strike and that a statement was being issued on their behalf to the media.

One man said “there is no difference between our case and others who are here on suspicion of drugs. The evidence is all planted, Due process is not followed and they have languished here for the last eight years.”

Towards the end of our visit, Dr Alexis Montes shared his perspective of the injustice experienced by them. He stated again that no due process was followed and he was waiting

to face the consequences. He concluded saying “legally my conscience is clear. I’m innocent.”

They expressed to us that our presence was for them a sign of hope.

We concluded our time with the men with a prayer. As we left the male detention centre we noticed the board that indicated the detention centre contained 652 people, with only 58 actually charged with something the rest held under suspicion of illegal activity.

Next we went to the female community health workers. This time after passing through the security measures we were taken to an area which also appeared to have cooking facilities. The women came and joined us their faces were not as obviously stressed as those of the men. They too wore the mandatory yellow t-shirts but some had transfers on them saying “Free the 43”.

Just as with the men we introduced our selves and the purpose and meaning of a Living Letters visit. Again we shared concerning our visit to Secretary de Lima and the news of hope for a positive outcome in their case in the near future. They welcomed this news. Several were moved to tears as we brought greetings and news from their families.

These women were amazing their outlook on their situation was positive but more than that we heard of their concerns. Dr Merry Clamor said “What happened to us is regrettable because we are working for the people.”

As we discussed the hunger strike that they have begun one woman said “our freedom is as important as the food we eat: it goes hand in hand.”

Dr Merry went on to say “We really think about the patients who come needing our services and we are not there.” “It gives us a sense of fulfilment to work for patients. The truth is they (the patients) have harder lives than us.”

Before our visit concluded the women sang two songs of hope for us with guitar accompaniment. This offered us the visitors much encouragement and gave us hope how even in adversity joy was possible.

### 3.4.2 Visit to the Morong Mothers and Babies Detained in Hospital



Mercy and Zelda  
Photo WCC Staff

The two mothers have not yet registered the birth of their babies as they do not want them to be stigmatized later in life.

#### **Mercy and Zelda** (the baby’s name means “gaol” in Tagalog)

Mercy comes from central Luzon in that province health care facilities are not adequate in the region. She decided to train as a community health worker to serve her community and provide better services to the people. Five months after commencing training whilst on the

Community First Responders Health Training, she was arrested under the suspicion of hiding ammunitions and explosives.

Baby Zelda was born 16 October. She was at the detention centre until she was due to deliver the baby. She was transferred to the General Hospital under prison guard until the baby was delivered. They have been under prison guard, remaining in the hospital ward under a court order until 16 January.

#### **Judilyn and Morong (baby named after the place of arrest)**

Judilyn told us how the day before the training concluded people with heavy backpacks came and searched the site. They had a warrant for Mario Condes this person was not found. The military arrested the Morong 43 and to everyone's amazement the backpacks now looked light and the accusations were made that explosives and bomb making equipment had been found.

Baby Morong was born 22 July straight after the birth mother and baby were taken back to the detention Centre. After 11 days a court order returned them under prison guard to the hospital ward. Initially moves were made by the authorities for the baby to be placed in community welfare.



Judilyn under  
hospital detention  
Photo WCC Staff

We were told that the court order will expire in January when both mothers will be returned to the detention Centre. The babies will be removed from their mothers and placed in the custody of other family members.

#### **4. Meeting with Church Representatives**

Church leaders or their representatives met with the Living Letters Team for worship and a fellowship meal at Balay Kalinaw, University of the Philippines, Quezon City. During the worship the team shared their observations and experiences with those present. The Statement that had been issued earlier in the day at a media conference was read and given to the Churches.

Bishop Solito K Toquero the Vice Chairperson of the NCCP responded and then those present thanked the team and presented a shawl to each member of the Living Letters Team saying;

*Take this shawl with you ... woven by people whose hope is grounded on unity towards common action. We are woven by our common desire to pursue a just and lasting peace. Your visit and stay in the Philippines to listen to the sacred stories of our people is a living testimony of your commitment to journey with the least of our brothers and sisters. This is your calling as ecumenical workers. We believe this is your continuing call which you have faithfully responded to. Carry with you the warmth of our people's love and gratitude. May the blessing of God continue to uphold you in your ministry."*



## **5. Conclusion**

Each member of the Living Letters Team to the Philippines came away deeply moved by the personal stories of violence, harassment and torture that we heard. The degree of injustice and human rights violations surprised the team.

Those who visited with the Morong 43 were inspired by the concern each expressed for their patients who needed their care. The members who visited with the Hacienda Luisita community were humbled by the hospitality and generosity of these people who have so little. Their resilience in the face of injustice amazed everyone.

The strength, courage and hope that the team witnessed in the Filipino people touched us all deeply.



### III- REFLECTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE LIVING LETTERS DELEGATION

*“I like to think that the presence of the WCC Living Letters Team and the eyes of the international community was some encouragement for definite steps to be taken leading to the overturning of charges against the Morong 43. Their subsequent release has shown me that violence and injustice can be overcome. In this visit I feel I have made a real difference in the lives of at least 43 people”.*

**Rev. Tara Curlewis, National Council of Churches in Australia**

*“We came to give and we received, we came to teach and we learnt”*

*While initially I viewed the Living Letters visit mainly as an opportunity to discover new cultures, people and places I had never encountered before, in the Philippines I found a land of vibrant Christianity, filled with joy and hope manifested silently and humbly yet intensely in an environment that is often hostile to Christian life. I witnessed the practical reflection of Apostle Paul’s statement that we bear treasures in “vessels of clay” and that our power lies with the Holy Spirit who gives us strength and life. I was revealed once more that Christianity stands firm as a “rock” in harsh conditions, which we, in Romania, also experienced during communist persecution. In suffering, Christians learn the meaning of practical solidarity, profound prayer, unshakable hope, and are strengthened in the conviction that God is not present in the world “ceremonially” but actively, as “mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace”. It is not easy to live genuinely as a Christian in the Philippines, yet it is all the more inspiring to see how Christianity operates there, often more efficiently than in countries with apostolic tradition such as Western European countries now undergoing rapid de-Christianisation.*

*The Living Letters visit shattered many of my preconceptions of the Filipino people and gave me a sense of their culture, hospitality and opening to others. The work of Churches in the Philippines can serve as a model of social attitude in the face of corruption, human trafficking, poverty, religious fundamentalism and other evils of modern society. I returned to Romania keeping in mind the smiling faces, resplendent with faith, of detained members of the Morong 43 group, and the misery of those who recounted the physical and psychological abuses they or their relatives had been inflicted by subordinates of oligarchs. Yet above all, I keep in my heart the hope that I felt as I held in*



Rev Dr Dan Sandu Baby  
Morong and Aneth  
Lwakatare  
Photo WCC Staff





*my arms one of infants of one of the group's member, a sign of trans-cultural Christian unity of Romania, Tanzania and the Philippines.*

*We give thanks to God for our fruitful visit, for the abundant blessings He gives us and for the opportunities He provides us to proclaim Him through our words and actions".*

**Rev. Dr Dan Sandu, Romanian Orthodox Church**

*"The souls of our Filipino neighbours are being pinched; their communities are suffering; their land and waters are crying out for release. We must continue to stand with them.*

*We are grateful that they stand with us and that they invited us to stand with them. They are a blessing to the global, ecumenical community, demonstrating what it is to live with courage: embodying hope, working for justice and resisting evil.*

*May all of our souls, our communities, and creation itself be blessed today by a renewed commitment to human rights. May we demonstrate that we are letters of Christ to one another, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God".*

**Moderator Mardi Tindal, United Church of Canada**

*I returned from the Living Letters visit emotionally and physically drained, in trying to absorb the horrendous situations, which many of the Filipino people faced on a regular basis : state-sponsored murders, enforced disappearances, illegal arrest and detention, violence, torture, intimidation, forced displacement, land-grabbing and the list goes on. It was difficult to come to terms with the levels of human suffering that we witnessed in the Philippines. Yet amidst this depressing darkness was the ray of hope: the undiminished and unquenchable spirit of the people we visited; their desire for justice and peace; their willingness to make whatever sacrifice required of them to this end. I am grateful for the opportunity to share in the lives and experiences of many of our Filipino brothers and sisters and I pray that God in His mercy will intervene in their situations and bring about His Justice and Peace as in the case of the Morong Detainees.*

**Ms Vijula Arulanantham, Christian Conference of Asia**

*Corruption, political repression , sovereignty, human rights violations, forced migration are all issues for a just and lasting peace that require of us reflection in so far as it leads towards qualitative change in the use of power.*



*“The struggle for a just and lasting peace requires a movement or more precisely a people's movement inspired by the divine will: "you shall be my people and I shall be your God!" Such a movement can hardly be equated to a monument. Then, the church literally self-emptying for the people becomes the movement of the people for genuine change. At once it is ecumenical and evangelical. Ecumenical because it strives for that unity essential in seeking God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven". Evangelical because God's Word and the people's issues engage each other in the same way that Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman at the well and the sick man near the pool at Bethsaida. God's Word is proclaimed”.*

**Fr Rex Reyes, National Council of Churches in the Philippines**

*“Being part of the WCC living letter team visiting the Philippines was a very nice and touching experience for me. The most interesting but touching part of the visit was when we paid a visit to the detention centre where the 43 health workers were detained. After meeting the male detainees and then later meeting the female detainees I was surprised by the smiles the female detainees had on their faces. They were full of hope that something positive would happen soon. The other stories we heard and the signs of hope we gave them was to me the most important part of the visit.*

*I was also impressed by the way the NCCP engages itself in human rights work despite all the challenges. The Living Letters visit was short but still it was very fruitful. Yet, a lot needs to be done for the people in Philippines and all other human being suffering from injustice”.*

**Ms Aneth Lwakatare, World Council of Churches**

*“The Living Letters visit to the Philippines was an inspiring and challenging journey. Inspiring because it was a wonderful thing to experience the solidarity, kindness and devotion of the Filipino people, and particularly of NCC Philippines. I have shared with several my friends and family members about this visit, and I have to confess that I am really overwhelmed by the energy and dedication NCC Philippines and the local civil society at large put in improving the human rights situation in the country. The farmers in Hacienda Luisita are heroes by themselves.*

*Challenging because it was painful to feel powerless when Mercy, one of the Morong 43 who had a baby, was holding her one-month child and crying because of the year-long imprisonment. I am happy that now she is among the Morong 43 that have been released. Let's hope and pray that the remaining ones too will be freed soon”.*

**Ms Semegnish Asfaw, World Council of Churches**



## **IV- RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. To the Ecumenical Community**

The Living Letters Team to the Philippines request that the WCC/CCIA and CCA

- i. *to write* to President Aquino requesting him to implement the promises he made in his inaugural speech concerning the release of the political prisoners and to bring an end to the extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances and abductions;
- ii. *to call* upon President Aquino for the immediate implementation of the decision of the Presidential Agrarian Reform Council to distribute land to farmers;
- iii. *to call* President Aquino to repeal the visiting forces agreement and withdraw all military presence from civilian communities;
- iv. *requests* the WCC through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) to monitor the human rights situation in the Philippines, particularly the extra-judicial killings, the enforced disappearances, and abductions. We also encourage the CCIA to lobby influential bodies and Governments in regard to cancelling the Hacienda Luisita stock distribution option (SDO) scheme and distributing the land to the farmers;
- v. *expresses* concern at the presence of a culture of impunity and *affirms* the need for a review of extra-judicial killings, including cold cases, so that where sufficient evidence exists the perpetrators may be brought to justice;
- vi. *encourages* CCA to strengthen its human rights program due to the prevalence of human rights violations not only in the Philippines but also in many parts of Asia.

### **2. To the Government of The Philippines**

The Living Letters Team to the Philippines

- i. *encourages* the Government of The Philippines in order to restore the confidence of the people of the Philippines in the judicial system to ensure that criminal investigation are conducted efficiently and expeditiously and that habeas corpus be upheld for all people at all times;
- ii. *calls* upon the Government to fully respect its responsibilities as a signatory to the UN Declaration on Human Rights;
- iii. *strongly urges* the President for the immediate and unconditional release of the 43 health workers; <sup>1</sup>
- iv. *encourages* the Government to implement programmes ensuring that all personnel in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and other Security Forces are trained in human rights standards and their responsibility to respect and protect the human rights of all people.
- v. *encourages* the government to consider the complex nature of development finance and loans with a view to safeguarding vital social services, such as hospitals, state universities and other agencies, as a priority for the Philippines to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.



### **3. To the churches.**

The Living Letters Team

- i. *appeals* that the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) works hand in hand with the Roman Catholic Church in their efforts to overcome violence and bring lasting peace;
- ii. *requests* the NCCP and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines to initiate a “Truth and Reconciliation Process” for the sake of national health and healing;
- iii. *appeals* to the churches of Canada and Australia and their partners to impress upon their government agencies the importance of fully endorsing and implementing the recommendations of the UN special Rapporteur Philip Alston and ensuring responsible mining operations and military security activities in Mindanao and other provinces;
- iv. *affirms* the ministry of the church agencies who work with victims of harassment, intimidation and torture by providing sanctuary for people.



## **V- EPILOGUE**

Secretary de Lima presented the President with a memorandum concerning the release of the Morong 43 on December 3.

Human Rights Day December 10, President Benigno C. Aquino III ordered the Department of Justice (DOJ) to withdraw the charges against the 43 health workers

December 16 the charges were dropped.

December 17, 33 of the detained Morong 43 were released from Camp Bagong Diwa.

In the early hours of December 18, those released attended a press conference in the Cathedral Hall of the Episcopal Church's National Cathedral of St. Mary and St John. The Most Rev. Edward Malecdan, Prime Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Bishop Emeritus Gabriel Garol of the United Church of Christ and The Very Rev. James Boliget, Dean of the Cathedral were amongst those who welcomed those released after 10 months and 6 days detention.

December 28, two more of the health workers walked to freedom.

Three health workers remain in detention at Camp Bagong Diwa under other charges,

The five health workers who were previously separated from the group remain under military detention.

NCCP continues to monitor the status of all remaining in detention.

## VI- APPENDICES

App. 1 - Living Letters delegation Statement – 5 December 2010

App. 2 – Morong 43 Statement – 4 December 2010

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<sup>1</sup> Charges were withdrawn 16 December followed by the release of 33 health workers late on 17 December