

Mothers of Missing Struggle On

Author: IWPR

With the state unable or unwilling to help, mothers of the disappeared left to seek justice themselves. Erlinda Cadapan, 59, has lost count of the number of times she has traveled to Manila to give interviews, attend forums and speak at meetings. Often she arrives home late at night only to receive a text asking her to return to the capital the following day for another event.

The incessant traveling and the associated costs are taking their toll, but she welcomes each and every invitation to speak. "I have to do this as mothers who give up never find their children," she said.

Erlinda is the mother of missing university student Sherlyn. It is now more than two years since her daughter was abducted by suspected military agents and joined the long list of desaparecidos - human rights activists and political leaders who have "disappeared".

Sherlyn, a sports science student at the University of the Philippines in Quezon City, was taken at gunpoint on June 26, 2006 along with fellow student Karen Empeño and farmer Manuel Merino, who stepped in to try and help after hearing the girls' scream. The three had been working as community organisers in Bulacan just north of Manila.

"I never thought that something bad would happen to my child because I see nothing wrong with her being an activist, helping the people who were not familiar with the laws and the benefits they should be receiving. To me this constitutes helping the government but the government obviously thinks otherwise," said Erlinda.

While the authorities may be failing the disappeared -unable or simply unwilling to help - their families refuse to give up and become silent victims themselves.

"I really need to remain active so the international community, our local media, even the authorities and..the perpetrators know that I know where my daughter is. The military is holding her and it is the military's responsibility to help me find my daughter," said Erlinda.

Speaking recently in a live television debate on human rights and the media organised by the ABS CBN News, ANC, Channel and the Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project, Erlinda explained how she had repeatedly been turned away by soldiers at gunpoint when turning up at military bases to look for her daughter.

Last December, two brothers testified at the Court of Appeals how they had been held captive by the military alongside Sherlyn and the two others.

Raymund Manalo provided a detailed account of the time he spent with Sherlyn, Karen and Manuel as part of a petition for a writ of amparo served on the Armed Forces of the Philippines, AFP, by Erlinda.

The writ of amparo obliges respondents to prove they did not violate the human rights of the named

people.

Manalo, whose testimony corroborated accounts given by other abductees, stated how he and his brother had been held captive alongside Sherlyn and the others in Camp Tecson in San Miguel in Bulacan. He added that they were then all transferred to the 24th Infantry Battalion camp in Limay in Bataan.

He testified how Sherlyn, who was expecting her first baby when abducted, was chained up, tortured and repeatedly raped. He also claimed that the two women suddenly disappeared from the second camp one day in June 2007 when he, his brother and Merino were all taken out and forced to sleep overnight in a nearby forest.

Manalo testified that they were brought back the following day but that neither he nor his brother ever saw Sherlyn and Karen again. He claimed Merino was subsequently killed and his body burnt inside the camp, and was told by a soldier not to bother looking for Sherlyn or Karen as they and Merino were "already together".

The AFP continues to deny any responsibility for the abductions or knowledge about the whereabouts of the abductees. However, the Court of Appeals has ruled that there was strong evidence that Merino and the others were seized by the military. Moreover, it found that Major General Jovito Palparan, the army's former counter insurgency chief and a fierce anti-Communist, "was not telling the whole truth", and his men were "evasive and contradictory" in their claims to know nothing about the case.

Palparan has been charged by the media and human rights groups with responsibility for abductions and extra judicial killings. When it was finally published in February last year, the government's own Melo Commission report claimed "there was an increase in activist killings in the areas where Gen. Palparan was assigned".

Palparan denies any responsibility for extra judicial killings.

Yet despite testimonies, both Erlinda and Karen's mother, Concepcion Empeño, are still hoping that their daughters will one day return safely home.

"The only hope I am holding on right now is that I will be able to see Karen soon," Concepcion said in a phone interview. "We are always waiting for her. I will always keep on searching."

Erlinda said that it was only after her daughter disappeared that she realised their family had been under some kind of surveillance. Still, though, she cannot quite believe it.

"I never thought my family would be a victim of a human rights violation by the government. I am respected in our community as the secretary of the homeowners association. When the head is not available, people come to me and so I never had any inkling that we had a problem with the authorities," she said.

Now her heart is full of rage for those she considers responsible for her daughter's disappearance.

"When I imagine how they tortured my daughter, my anger with the government boils up as I expect them to protect and serve the people as mandated by our constitution," she said.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, the case of their missing daughters has turned both mothers into activists themselves. It is both part therapy and part solidarity. The mothers of the disappeared help and strengthen each other. Many of them also look to and receive support from the human rights group Karapatan.

According to its general secretary, Marie Hilao-Enriquez, Karapatan provides a range of services to the families of the disappeared, including legal support, assistance and even counseling.

"Our office is an office in the morning and a safe house in the evening for people to come when they need to," she said, adding that they encourage the relatives to organise themselves into a group "because it is only when they are together that they see hope".

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