



human rights *first*

THE NEW NAME OF

LAWYERS COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

March 31, 2005

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo
Republic of the Philippines
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Dear President Macapagal-Arroyo:

Human Rights First was alarmed to hear of an apparent assassination attempt on noted lawyer Romeo T. Capulong on March 7, 2005. We know of Mr. Capulong as a judge of the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. But it is clear he is also one of the Philippines' most accomplished lawyers and has played a role in many struggles for justice in his own country. It appears he was targeted for his efforts to uncover responsibility for deaths in connection with a strike at Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac province.

This attack has also brought to our attention the shocking story of killings and other attacks related to the strike. Military and police clashed with the Hacienda Luisita picket line last November, killing seven strikers. Since that incident, strike supporters Abelardo Ladera, William Tadena, and Marcelino Beltran, have been killed. Beltran was a witness to the November attack, and his death is a serious blow to efforts to discover the truth about what happened in this incident. A militia group has been linked to these killings; the group should immediately be investigated and prosecuted, and any connections to the authorities exposed.

These killings in turn highlight a broader trend of targeting labor and human rights activists associated with left-wing politics. Comments by government and military officials labeling some of these individuals as communists, subversives, or terrorists, have contributed to a climate of violence and threat. We have received reports of an increase in the practice since 2001, and note with alarm that such actions increase the likelihood that human rights defenders or labor activists will

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become the target of threats and violence from security forces, army-backed militias, or police.

The state has clear obligations under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Philippines is a signatory, to protect its citizens from extrajudicial execution. The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders further states that the “State shall conduct a prompt and impartial investigation or ensure that an inquiry takes place whenever there is reasonable ground to believe that a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms has occurred in any territory under its jurisdiction.”

We urge the Government of the Republic of the Philippines to condemn these acts, to identify the perpetrators, bring them to justice, and ensure the safety of human rights defenders involved in this labor case and others. Furthermore we call on the Government of the Republic of the Philippines to cease labeling its critics in a manner that contributes to an atmosphere of threat against them.

For many around the world, the history of the Philippines demonstrates a triumph of democracy and human rights over dictatorship. Mr. Capulong is an important part of this victory, as are the numerous grassroots activists who have given their lives. We hope that you will address this matter with the utmost seriousness it deserves.

Sincerely,



Neil Hicks
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