



KAIROS PARTNER STORIES

Héritiers de la Justice (Heirs of Justice)

The work of human rights defenders, Héritiers de la Justice (Heirs of Justice), in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is extremely dangerous. Héritiers de la Justice depends on international solidarity for survival, as well as protection through media exposure and advocacy from groups like KAIROS. Former Executive Secretary of Héritiers de la Justice, Pascal Kabangulu, was recently assassinated in his home in Bukavu, in front of his wife Deborah Kiutmaini and his family (now refugees in Canada).

Kabangulu was assassinated for his knowledge of illicit gold mining in Kamituga, South Kivu, and for

his persistent defense of human rights, such as publicizing small-scale massacres. He shares the fate of a long line of human rights defenders who have died at the hands of armed rebel groups, militias and the military itself. KAIROS is advocating for the resumption of suspended legal proceedings in the DRC in Pascal Kabangulu's case, but also views this as a portal through which to help Congolese civil society combat the pervasive culture of impunity that exists there. KAIROS also sees this as an opportunity to monitor general progress in the areas of justice and human rights in the DRC. Meanwhile, Kabangulu's killers, including the military officer who is believed to be the mastermind behind the slaying, are still at large.

As a KAIROS human rights partner, Héritiers de la Justice is working hard to combat the impunity with which citizens' rights are violated in eastern DRC, where the UN and aid agencies say some 1000 people die daily from war-related causes. One aspect of the Héritiers de la Justice' work that KAIROS supports is its promotion of knowledge about human rights and the rule of law among national, provincial and local government employees—particularly as it relates to violence against women. KAIROS also supports Héritiers de la Justice' initiative to create spaces in which leaders are made accountable to citizens for public sector service. In these spaces, citizens are given the opportunity to ask accountability questions of leaders and participate democratically in making decisions about the areas where they live. KAIROS also recently worked with Héritiers de la Justice to monitor the national elections, as well as develop a legal clinic for women victims of rape and other forms of gender-based violence.



Maurice Namwira, current director of Héritiers de la Justice (Heirs of Justice)



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Yolanda Becerra, Popular Women's Organization (OFP)

Yolanda Becerra risks her life for her work. She is the National Director of KAIROS partner, the Popular Women's Organization (OFP), a grassroots women's organization in Colombia. According to the UN, Colombia continues to be the country with the worst humanitarian crisis in the Americas. The face of Colombia's crisis is often female. Women are not only direct victims of the conflict and human rights violations, they are also often those who are left behind to cope. Women and children make up most of the displaced population.

The Popular Women's Organization (OFP) raises a voice for women and for human rights. The OFP operates 22 women's centres throughout Colombia, where they run community kitchens, health and legal services, workshops and programs for youth. OFP centres represent an important democratic space and, for many women, an alternative to the violence, poverty and human rights abuses that surrounds them.

Yolanda's life continues to be threatened. In December 2007, paramilitary threatened her and gave her 48 hours to leave. She fled her home and continued to lead the OFP from a nearby town. In February 2009 she received further threats to her life. Fortunately, with international accompaniment and support, Yolanda has been able to continue doing her important work.

Yet, despite all efforts by the OFP and international partners, there are women in the OFP who have lost their lives for their work. In October 2003, KAIROS received an urgent action from the OFP about the brutal murder of Esperanza Amaris Miranda, the coordinator of one of the OFP's community kitchens. Three paramilitary came to her home and forced her into a jeep in front of her 21 year-old daughter. Five minutes later, Esperanza was murdered and her body was thrown into the street – another example of the paramilitary's campaign of terror. "Esperanza" means hope. Her memory and her name live on in the courageous, creative and tireless work of the OFP.

The financial support and accompaniment that KAIROS provides to the OFP through our CIDA program has been essential in maintaining and building the organization as a space to defend human rights, offer services to women and develop alternatives. These programs save lives.



a Yolanda Becerra, national director of the OFP, with a colleague. A beautiful painting of Esperanza Miranda, an OFP member assassinated in October 2003, hangs on the wall.



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National Union of People's Lawyers, Philippines

Much attention has been paid to the brutal massacre in Ampatuan, Maguindanao in the Philippines last November 23, 2009. Among the victims—who were mostly journalists engaged in monitoring peaceful election-related activity—were Attorney Cynthia Oquendo and Attorney Concepcion “Connie” Brizuela. These two lawyers were active and leading members of the Union of Peoples’ Lawyers in Mindanao (UPLM) and the National Union of People’s Lawyers of the Philippines (NUPLP), a KAIROS partner in promoting and defending human rights in the Philippines.



*Atty. Cynthia Oquendo with her husband and children.
(Photo: Philippine Daily Inquirer)*

The NUPLP was founded in September 2007 in response to the escalating human rights violations in the country and the need for coordinated and systematic but immediate legal remedy and assistance to victims. Their mandate is to devote their professional time defending the rights and welfare of human rights workers, political activists, community organizers, church people, farmers, workers, indigenous peoples, journalists, student leaders and others who stand for their rights and their political beliefs. The NUPLP’s chosen clients are those who are considered a threat to those in positions of power.

Extra-judicial killings, disappearances, torture, unjust arrests and detention, forcible evacuations and displacements, and political persecution have been perpetuated by a policy that has targeted civilians and professional people working for democratic change. So far, none of these atrocities have been effectively resolved nor genuinely addressed. The courageous and dynamic commitment of Oquendo and Brizuela will remain an inspiration to the hundreds of lawyers like them who tirelessly advocate for good governance and peace in the Philippines. However, without KAIROS’ continued support, these courageous people risk the same fate as their murdered colleagues.