

We are under siege because of our human rights work for the rural poor

Our organization is under siege. We are experiencing relentless systematic surveillance, harassments and threats because of the work that we do for the rural poor of Northern Mindanao.

‘Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.’—1 John 3:13

On March 7, 2014 at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Rural Missionaries of the Philippines-Northern Mindanao Sub-Region (RMP-NMR) [alternate coordinator Jonah Cossma Jumagbas](#) was followed by an unidentified man as she left our sub-regional office in Villaverde, Iligan City.

Jumagbas suspected that she was being tailed by a man in his mid-30s when she was at the Palao Market intending to buy some fruits. Trying to ward-off the pursuer, Jumagbas took a fast-paced walk along Quezon Avenue and circled back to Palao Market via Aguinaldo Avenue. But still, the man pursued, maintaining a 10-15 meter distance. Deflecting, Jumagbas took a jeepney ride going to Tambo Bus Terminal and then boarded a bus bound for Cagayan de Oro City. But while waiting for the bus to depart, Jonah saw the same man at the bus terminal, seeming to look for someone. To evade the pursuer, Jumagbas stepped out from the bus and hurriedly took a jeepney ride back to the City Proper where to find a safer place.

[Tenioso Balangiao Jr., member of the Sub-Regional Coordinating Body of RMP-NMR](#), continues to experience surveillance, harassment and intimidation as of this moment. The threat to Balangiao was confirmed on February 20, 2014, when he received a suspicious text message from an unidentified number. The sender indicated in the said message that he knows Balangiao and his family. The sender also told Balangiao that he knows his address, and that he also knows Balangiao fears for his security due to his work. The unknown sender also tried to reassure Balangiao that he must not worry for his life because he can protect him and his family.

This incident prompted Balangiao to change his mobile phone number. However, Balangiao continued to receive text messages from the same unidentified number. The message said, “*Ayaw pagpuli sim Jun kay makabalo gyapon ko sa imo namber...*” (Don't change your SIM card for I can still know your number...) With this, Balangiao engaged the unknown sender and from the exchange of messages, the sender identified himself as one 'John Meraflor'. He told Balangiao that he has good intentions and wants to make an acquaintance with him. From that date forward, the certain “John Meraflor” sends text messages to Balangiao telling him that he knows what Balangiao was doing for his work and tried to incriminate him as a supporter of the CPP-NPA (Communist Party of the Philippines/New Peoples' Army). The said texter also tried to implicate Balangiao as having plans to join the rebel group.

As a peasant community organizer of RMP-NMR, Balangiao works closely with the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP or Philippine Peasant Movement) in order to bring RMP's projects into far-flung peasant communities. Due to these messages, he does not feel safe and this has prompted him to keep away from his home and his work in RMP-NMR.

‘Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.’—Revelation 2:10

There's an obvious pattern of harassment and surveillance perpetrated against our organization since last year.

In September of 2013, our long-time lay co-worker, [Joel Q. Yagao, was slapped with trumped-up charges](#) – baseless charges of double murder and multiple murder. Despite interventions from international human rights organizations, Yagao is still in jail up to now for the crime he did not

commit. With the snail-paced judicial process we have in the country, he might stay in jail for a minimum of 5 years—even if proven not guilty.

Also last year, we have complained on the series of [harassments](#) against our sub-regional coordinator, Sr. Ma. Famita N. Somgod, MSM, and the [surveillance on our sub-regional headquarters](#). And on March 18, 2014, one of our literacy and numeracy schools in Agusan del Sur was also [harassed](#). Members of the 26th IB of the Philippine Army arrived at Sitio Tabanganan, Brgy. Binicalan in San Luis, Agusan del Sur. The teachers of the learning center and the parents of its students were then planning for their recognition exercises which they had set for March 20. Suddenly, they heard a series of gunshots coming from the area where the military was, not 100 meters away, directly in front of the school. The children who were at the playground scattered fearing that they were the targets of the bullets.

‘With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you.’—1 Peter 4:4

In a bigger context, it is important to note that extra-judicial killings and violations of civil and political rights of the rural poor has become a phenomenon in Northern Mindanao since 2012.

Earlier this year, farmer-leader Julito Lauron of Kasama-Bukidnon (Kahugpungan sa mga Mag-uuma sa Bukidnon or Peasant Association of Bukidnon) was [gunned down](#) on February 05. This happened after [Datu Rolando Ambungan of indigenous peoples’ community-based organization, Pig-akuman, was also killed by a paramilitary group](#) in Guinabsan, Buenavista Agusan del Norte on January 31.

[Rolen Langala, an indigenous leader of indigenous group Pangalasag in Opol town in Misamis Oriental was murdered](#) on December 1, 2013 days before the International Human Rights Week. Langala and his community’s resistance against palm oil cultivation encroaching their ancestral lands cost him his life, and of their chairperson, [Gilbert Paborada](#), who was also gunned down in October 2012.

It is also important to note the killings of [Jimmy Liguyon](#), [Margarito Cabal](#) and [Genesis Ambason](#), all human rights defenders working for land rights and the environment, all killed in 2012 in various dates and places. Despite interventions from various international human rights organizations and foreign consulates in the country, including the European Union, these killings were left unresolved.

Judicial harassment has also become a tactic against human rights defenders. Aside from Joel Yagao and a number of farmer activists slapped with legal cases, peasant organizer Estelita Tacalan, 61, was [abducted and was later surfaced with trumped-up charges](#) in March 2013. Estelita is still in prison right now, immobilized to continue her work for the Misamis Oriental Farmers’ Association-KMP.

In the face of all these forms of repression, RMP-NMR brought to the attention of the national and international human rights community the human rights violations committed with impunity done against our network of peasant organizations. We were never cowed. In all of these cases, we point our fingers at Pres. Benigno Aquino III and his state security forces for all of these crimes.

We believe that our organization is being targeted because we speak against all of these violations, and because of our sustained human rights work for the peasant communities in Northern Mindanao Region who stand against the militarization of their villages to pave way for the entry of companies engaged in resource-extractive activities such as mining, energy and plantations. We have condemned all of these systematic assaults against the rural poor’s civil and political rights committed in the framework of International Peace and Security Plan (IPSP), or more popularly called [‘Oplan Bayanihan.’](#)

We condemn these systematic harassment and surveillance, and all forms of human rights violations perpetrated against RMP-NMR and the rural poor communities we are serving.

As advocates from the church working on land rights and access to resources of the rural poor—farmers, fisherfolks, agricultural workers and indigenous peoples—our work falls under the definition of ‘human rights defenders’ defined in the United Nation’s ‘Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human

Rights and Fundamental Freedoms’ or the ‘Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.’ Yet, we have been subjected to surveillance, harassment and arbitrary arrests, and the rural poor communities we are serving are physically attacked.

Needless to say, the assaults against church advocates and human rights defenders are magnifying the terror in a bigger extent, and gives a chilling effect to the grassroots communities aspiring for genuine land reform, right to ancestral domain, and the fullness of life.

‘But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.’—1 Peter 3:14

Time and again, we have already called the attention of the state to cease the political violence they are inflicting on the people. To no avail. A lot of our work and staff have been displaced, and our regular operations have been affected by these relentless attacks against us.

But we will continue to carry forward our commitment of living and working with the rural poor for the realization of their just aspirations for land rights and access to resources, and together we will continue to demand justice for the thousands of victims of human rights violations—no matter how long it takes.

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