

National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (NUPL), Philippines
Press Statement
24 January 2019



The Nth hour has come; Even Committed Lawyers Worldwide are on the Verge of Extinction

Today, the Day of the Endangered Lawyer, we at

the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers sounds the alarm on the escalating attacks against lawyers everywhere. These are dark times indeed, when lawyers are unjustly arrested and tried and even killed simply for the practice of law as a profession.

The experience of our colleagues in Turkey is a prime example of how an autocratic system has led to the arrest and detention of hundreds of lawyers.. President Tayyip Erdogan suspended or dismissed about 4,238 judges and prosecutors. The vast majority of these lawyers, including two members of the constitutional court, are in prison and only a fraction have heard formal charges.

Scores of lawyers are held in custody in Turkey simply for the practice of law as a profession. The accused are members of the Progressive Lawyers Association in Turkey (ÇHD), including ÇHD President, Selçuk Kozağaçlı, a Bureau member of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL).

The unbelievable indictment claimed that these lawyers merely counseled detained people accused of membership in a banned Turkish organization and they are charged with visiting these individuals in prison, offering legal support, enabling their clients to invoke “the right to remain silent.” The Erdogan regime is targeting ÇHD and People’s Law Office members reportedly because these members continue to resist the regime’s campaign of systematic repression.

It is no different in the Philippines, a country headed quite ironically by a lawyer himself. Here, at least thirty-five lawyers have been killed and several others harassed simply for abiding by their sworn oath to defend their clients. Many of these killings remain unsolved with no one held to account for the murders, thus the perpetrators continue to kill with impunity.

Last year has been especially hard for the NUPL as we still mourn the loss of one of our beloved members, human rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos. Ben was gunned down by two unidentified men riding in tandem close to his home. For many years, he has dedicated his life in the staunch defense of the rights of the farmers, not only in Negros Island but also in other parts of the country.

Many of the lawyers attacked or harassed are involved in human rights work, most of whom are members of NUPL. NUPL has been very critical of human rights violations committed by the State’s machinery and many of its members have been handling cases of sectors whose rights have been violated – indigenous peoples, farmers, workers, urban poor, political prisoners, human rights defenders and even suspected petty drug users. The harassment has spiraled to the point of red-tagging – accusing these dedicated lawyers as members of terrorist organizations.

The intent of the killings and harassment is clear – silence dissent, penalize those who criticize government, discourage lawyers from taking up the cudgels in behalf the oppressed and powerless.

Under the 1990 UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, all State parties shall ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference and where the security of lawyers is threatened as a result of discharging their functions, they shall be adequately safeguarded by the authorities. It angers us that many State parties have not only failed to comply with this obligation but are themselves violators and perpetrators of intimidation and harassment.

But this is not the time to despair at the sheer number of deaths and unjust arrests and detention of lawyers worldwide.

On this Day of the Endangered Lawyer, we call on all lawyers to close ranks and stand our ground in the face of attacks on the very exercise of our profession.

We Filipino lawyers who are also under siege, stand in solidarity and unite with our Turkish colleagues and with lawyers from all parts of the world in condemning the trumped-up charges, the detentions, the labelling, the harassments, the intimidations and the killings. We ask that they be respected, protected, given due process and freed.

We hold all autocratic governments accountable for failing to fulfill their obligations and for being themselves violators of these basic principles.

Finally, we reiterate our call for governments to take action for the cessation of all killings and harassments of lawyers, to investigate and hold accountable all those who have violated the rights of endangered lawyers and the rights of marginalized peoples of the world that these lawyers represent.#

References:

- Atty. Ephraim B. Cortez, NUPL Secretary General, 09175465798
- Atty. Josalee S. Deinla, NUPL Spokesperson, 0917546 5798