

## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PHILIPPINES**

### **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **Philippine government must show ability to render justice in Maguindanao Massacre, says International group**

On the second anniversary of the Maguindanao massacre, Amnesty International lamented the very slow wheels of justice in the Philippines and called on the Philippine authorities to abide by its obligations under international human rights law to ensure effective remedy for victims of the Maguindanao massacre and their families, and to break the continuing impunity. Amnesty International also reiterated its call for improved support to witnesses and victims' families.

57 people, 32 of them journalists were killed in the Maguindanao massacre on November 23, 2009. The victims were brutally killed and dumped in a mass grave on a hillside in the town of Ampatuan in the southern Philippine province of Maguindanao.

"The Philippine government has to show that it has the ability to render justice in a massacre that constituted the world's worst ever attack on journalists and the world's worst ever election related single incident that killed 57 people. Significant delays in the hearings continue, 100 of the 197 charged of the crime remain at large and support to the victims' families are very inadequate. A key suspect Zaldy Ampatuan has not been arraigned. Until when will the families of the victims of the Maguindanao massacre wait for justice? Until when will they wait for stronger support while they watch the uphill battle for justice?" said Dr. Aurora A. Parong, Amnesty International Philippines Director.

Those killed were on their way to witness the filing of candidacy for a local politician when they were stopped by about 100 armed men. Leaders of the powerful Ampatuan clan have been charged in connection with the killings but no prosecutions have been concluded. The clan's private army and members of the local police and military are likewise implicated in the murder case.

As of October 2011, almost 2 years after the massacre, it was reported that a total of 100 accused including nine personnel of the Philippine National Police (PNP) remain unaccounted for to face trial - 9 policemen, 4 military personnel, 18 members of the Ampatuan clan, and 69 members of the civilian volunteer organization (CVO), which acted as the private army of the Ampatuans.

"Private armies and civilian volunteer organizations continue to operate, even if they were implicated in the Maguindanao massacre and many other human rights abuses in the country for several years now. President Aquino has to immediately take steps to dismantle private armies, as he promised. And we hope the President will withdraw Executive Order 546 which effectively authorizes private armies by allowing the Philippine National Police to deputize militias and Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) as "force multipliers", said Dr. Parong.

In November 2010, President Aquino announced that he had no plans to revoke E.O. 546 which is contrary to his public pronouncements three days after the Maguindanao Massacre in 2009.

Various challenges have arisen since the start of the trial. One witness was killed before he was accepted into the Witness Protection Program (WPP). There are 300 possible witnesses in the case according to the prosecution and each week, the government prosecutors are only able to present two to four witnesses. Families of the victims are sometimes unable to attend the hearings because they could not afford the airfare from their homes to Manila, where the trials are being held. According to some victims' family, the primary suspects in the case have offered through emissaries settlement of P25 million per victim.

"We hope the Witness Protection Act will be amended very soon to include better support system for the witnesses and victims' families.

Due diligence from the executive, the legislative and the judiciary – the 3 branches of government – are called upon to ensure that the right to remedy is a reality in our country." Concluded Dr. Parong.