



*Church people's campaign to provide sanctuary and extend its resources to the victims of extra-judicial killings and their families and relatives and other victims of human rights violations. However, Seeing and feeling the realities of sowing fear, killings with impunity, and the government's inaction the Church cannot remain silent but must speak and cry out to heavens in solidarity with the persecuted people of God.*

Sirungan is a Bikol term for temporary shelter, or it may also connote sanctuary. Sirungan may well describe the church character and capability to provide refuge or sanctuary to all the victims of human rights violations and to the families and relatives of the victims of extra-judicial killings in Bikol. The churchpeople can extend help through provision of direct shelter, resources for legal and other personal or family needs of the victims and survivors.

*"May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor..." (Psalm 72.3-4,)*

### **Nature of the Campaign:**

The unabated killings, direct attacks and threats against peace advocates, citizens and activists in the Philippines are widespread and systematically done with impunity. Victims, relatives, friends and cause-oriented groups have been calling for the immediate stop to these direct assaults to the dignity of life and wanton violations of human rights with completely inadequate response or none at all by the government. The campaign to stop extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances and harassments to our modern-day prophets have reached the attention of the international community.

Forced by appeals and condemnation from different bodies and institutions the GMA administration formed bodies to investigate the killings. But long before Task Force Usig (TFU) could finish its tasks it already announced its findings and conclusions. It concocted alibis and lies about the truth of the killings by accusing the Left as the mastermind of these criminal acts, freeing the death squads of the police and military as the real culprits and thereby liberating the US-Arroyo regime of its culpability. A lot of people, including from those in the international community denounced the result of TFU and pressured the government to take more active response to stop the killings.

Malacanang organized the Melo Commission by virtue of Administrative Order 157 (series of 2006) to conduct a so-called "independent" study to address media and activists killings. The government also sought the help of UN, EU and the Amnesty International to assist the government in investigating the growing cases of extra-judicial killings in the country.

However, Malacanang for a time, withheld from the public the contents of the submitted Melo Commission Report and even refused to furnish the EU and the UN Commission on Human Rights' special rapporteur a copy insisting that the report on extra-judicial killings was still incomplete. It was only forced to release the report after Philip Alston, the UN HR special rapporteur announced the result of his initial report.

The Melo report may have been designed as a win-win solution for the Arroyo administration. It assuaged public outrage over the killings by tagging a small group of military men along with the notorious Gen. Palparan as responsible for the crimes. At the same time, it shielded Arroyo and her cabinet from any responsibility arising from government policies. On the other hand, Alston's report "clearly pointed the finger in the direction of the military establishment in so far as the perpetrators of a majority of these killings. He upbraided the inability of the judicial system to render justice to government's failure to undertake effective police investigations that lead to actual prosecution and punishment of the guilty parties," according to Carol Pagaduan.

Surprisingly, the Alston report already took note that "the increase in extra-judicial executions in recent years is attributable, at least in part, to a shift in counterinsurgency strategy..." Specifically, "in some areas, an appeal to hearts-and-minds is combined with an attempt to vilify left-leaning organizations and to intimidate leaders of such organization. In some instances, such intimidation escalated into extrajudicial execution."

### **Victimizing Modern-Day Prophets**

Even church people who were performing their prophetic role were not spared. Most Rev. Alberto Ramento, Obispo Maximo of IFI was brutally killed inside his convento in Tarlac. Pastor Isaias Sta.Rosa, was forcibly dragged out of his house by about 10 masked gunmen and also brutally killed just a few meters from his house on 3 August 2006. Sta. Rosa was found dead beside a creek with another dead man who also had gunshot wounds lying beside him. The police identified the other fatality as Cpl. Lodger Pastrana of the Philippine Army who was identified to be one of the men who had earlier forced their way into Sta. Rosa's house. Found near his body was .45 caliber pistol with silencer. Also found in his wallet was a Mission Order signed by Major Earnest Mark Rosal of Camp Matillana in Pili, Camarines

Sur. Isaias Santa Rosa was a freelance writer, project consultant for non-governmental organizations, Executive Director of the Farmers' Assistance for Rural Management Education and Rehabilitation, Inc. (a non-government organization that gives assistance to farmers in improving their economy), and a member of the Legazpi City United Methodist Church in South Bicol District. In 2004, Joel Baclao, a member of the local church of UCCP and the regional coordinator of PCPR Bicol was also brutally killed near his house and in front of his wife and his four year old son.

Some churches have been denouncing the traitorous and criminal acts committed against church people, progressive party list members, and leaders and ordinary members of sectoral groups. Indeed, the churches cannot remain silent over the crawling darkness and reigning of fear and terror in the country and in the region. It is incumbent for churches to speak and let its prophetic voice be heard. Let its cry of condemnation reach the heavens for justice and let those who hold power tremble with fear for the awakening and regaining of people's dignity.

As Church people in Bicol, we must come together in the spirit of ecumenism and collective reflection and action to journey together with the oppressed and exploited people of God. In solidarity with the victims of human rights violations, and the families, relatives and witnesses of the victims of extra-judicial killings we need to offer and open our facilities and resources as their refuge, as their sanctuary, while assisting them in seeking justice. Let its facilities and resources be offered for the care of victims, relatives and witnesses and for pursuing justice for the victims.

### **The Birth of SIRUNGAN**

It is in this context that Church people in Bicol started to gather and held a series of reflection sessions and collectively decided and committed to opening the doors of the Churches in Bicol as refuge or sanctuaries for the victims and their families, relatives and witnesses and offer their resources for them in pursuit of justice and in promotion of the dignity of life. Church people in Bicol must also be actively involved in searching for the truth and in the promotion and defense of the dignity of life.

On September 21, 2006 at a nipa hut in the Redemptorist Mission Center, 10 Church people reflected on the issues of human rights situation in Bicol and the hidden hands behind the orchestra of extra-judicial killings. The group observed the minimal or none at all participation of the Churches in speaking in behalf of the victims- the oppressed and persecuted children of God. The group affirmed the vital role that must be played by the Churches in this situation. On November 17, 2006, the group again gathered and laid out plans for the realization of a Church people's community to lead in the campaign against extra-judicial killings in Bicol and to give refuge or sanctuary to the victims of human rights violations. Due to the engagements of Church people in disaster response and relief efforts after typhoon Reming wrought havoc to the region, Sirungan convenors were able to gather again only last March 2, 2006 at the Chancery Office of the Diocese of Legazpi, but substantial issues and concerns were discussed and agreed upon. Previous plans were reviewed and the harrowing data on the heightening cases of extra-judicial killings and human rights violations were updated. A plan to launch Sirungan through a regional Church people's conference was finalized. The group met again last March 6, 2007 at the same venue and new proposals and recommendations were given due considerations.

This new development on the gathering of Church people in Bicol in responding to the signs of the times imparts a new message of hope to the victims of oppression and suppression. The advent of Sirungan will definitely earn the ire of the powers that be. But, Church people are determined and committed to pursue the truth, promote the sanctity of life and defend human dignity.

### **Objectives:**

This campaign aims to:

1. Gather together a large number of church people to collectively reflect and act on the issue of extra-judicial killings in the region and in the country as a whole;
2. to build mechanism/s and other support structure/s on how churches can effectively manifest its loving and protective care for the victims of extra-judicial killings and other human rights violations, including support and assistance to their families, and relatives in seeking for justice, which may take the form of providing shelter, logistics support and personal or family needs;
3. Launch information education campaign; and,
4. Seek and advocate possible sustainable solution to the on-going armed conflict in the Philippines like calling for the resumption of peace talks between the GRP and NDFP and between GRP and MILF.