

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/philippines-another-journalist-murdered-police-09-05-2012,42573.html>

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Asia - Philippines

Violence and impunity

## Another journalist gunned down, fourth since start of 2012

9 May 2012

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Reporters Without Borders is shocked to learn that **Nestor Libaton**, a reporter for Catholic Church-run radio *dxHM*, was gunned down yesterday afternoon in Mati, the capital of Davao Oriental province on the southern island of Mindanao.

The press freedom organization offers its condolences to his wife and their four children and urges the authorities to do everything to shed light on his death. He was the fourth journalist to be killed in the Philippines this year.

Aged 45, Libaton had worked for the same station for the past 20 years. He was shot several times by men on a motorcycle as he returned with fellow journalist Eldon Cruz from an interview in nearby Tarragona.

The motive is not yet known but the *National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP)* quoted colleagues of Libaton as saying they thought it could be linked to his work. The other three journalists killed since the start of the year are **Rommel "Jojo" Palma** (on 30 April), **Aldion Layao** (on 8 April) and **Christopher Guarin** (on 5 January).

In a separate development, the *NUJP* quoted **Michael James "Dacoycoy" Licuanan**, a reporter and commentator on *Bombo Radyo* in the city of Cagayan de Oro (on Mindanao island), as saying he received an SMS message on 5 May containing death threats.

It followed an anonymous call to the station at the end of last month complaining about his impassioned coverage of drug trafficking. Licuanan's coverage of sensitive stories has got him into trouble in the past and he sustained a gunshot injury in an apparent murder attempt on 24 November.



Photo credit: Cesar Lanos

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### **07/05/2012 - Another journalist murdered, police attacks on media**

Reporters Without Borders is very concerned about the climate of violence and hostility for the Philippine media, which has just been underscored by another murder, last week's fatal shooting of **Rommel "Jojo" Palma**, a driver and journalist with *dxMC-Bombo Radyo* in Koronadal, on the southern island of Mindanao.

It is particularly disturbing that policemen have been behind attacks and threats to journalists and their families in recent weeks. Some have even been involved in murders or murder attempts. Judicial proceedings against journalists and other forms of obstruction of the media are also on the increase.

"We offer our condolences to Rommel Palma's family and friends," Reporters Without Borders said. "His murder must be properly investigated as soon as possible. It must not go unpunished as the murders of journalists **Dennis Cuesta**, **Christopher Guarin** and **Aldion Layao** have until now. Impunity is particularly disturbing when – instead of doing their job of protecting the public – some police officers abuse their authority and perpetuate the use of violence against those who expose their illegal and criminal activities.

"We appeal again to President Benigno Aquino to take effective measures to protect journalists and to impose exemplary punishments on criminal networks and police officers who act outside the law. References to the media's 'negative' impact on the country's image are being used as a smokescreen to avoid tackling the root of the evil. They do not help to address the most urgent problem, the violence to which journalists are constantly exposed."

#### **Palma murder**

Aged 31, Palma was gunned down by two individuals on a Honda TMX motorcycle on 30 April while waiting in the carpark outside the South Cotabato regional hospital in Koronadal, to which he had just driven another reporter. Shot four times in the neck and back, he was pronounced dead at 5:45 a.m. by the hospital's doctors.

The *National Union of Journalists of the Philippines* quoted *dxMC-Bombo Radyo* manager **Hermie Legaspi** as saying the police suspected two men, so far identified only by the aliases of Bobot and Hagibis, who had gone to Palma's Koronadal home asking for him on 22 April, at a time when he was not there.

Palma, who presented local news reports and weather forecasts on *dxMC-Bombo Radyo*, was the second journalist to be killed in Mindanao island's South Cotabato region this year. His death

follows that of Christopher Guarin, the editor of *Tatak News Nationwide* and a host on radio station *dxMD*, who was ambushed and killed near the city of General Santos on 5 January. The alleged killer, Marvin Palabrica, is still at large.

### **New development in 2008 Cuesta murder**

There was a new development in the Dennis Cuesta case on 5 April when, during a radio interview, onetime police informant Jade Isa accused former police inspector Redempto "Boy" Acharon of planning to murder **Alex Josol**, the manager of General Santos-based *dxMD Radio Mindanao Network* and two other people, department of justice employee Badong Ramos and Cuesta's widow, Gloria Cuesta.

Acharon's alleged motive for wanting to kill them was to stop them shedding light on the murder of Cuesta, a radio *dxMD* talkshow host who was gunned down in General Santos in August 2008. Acharon was accused of the murder but eluded arrest and the case was shelved in 2010. Isa said he was present at meetings in November 2011 and February 2012 at which Acharon planned to kill the three with his cousin's help.

Cuesta's widow reacted to these allegations by writing to the justice minister and President Aquino to demand the reopening of the investigation into Cuesta's murder and an investigation into Acharon's alleged subsequent triple murder plans. Josol, for his part, asked the police to provide him with protection but they have not as yet responded to his request.

### **Prosecution**

A regional court in the city of Iloilo, on the central island of Panay, issued arrests warrants on 11 April for **Junep Ocampo**, the editor of *The News Today (TNT)*, and **Manuel "Boy" Mejorada**, one of his columnists, making each of them pay bail of 10,000 pesos (179 euros) to avoid arrest. The warrants were the latest development in a libel action by Iloilo mayor Jed Patrick Mabilog, who is suing them for 15.2 millions de pesos (272,000 euros) over an 8 November 2011 column headlined "Body of Evidence" in which Mejorada accused Mabilog of misusing a donation he had received as the founder and chairman of an Iloilo-based foundation

Iloilo prosecutor Honorio Aragona Jr. announced on 3 February that criminal libel charges would be brought against Mejorada and Ocampo over the article. They would be given the chance to demonstrate that it was written "in good faith and in pursuit of the public good" at their trial, he said.

### **Threats**

In the case of Aldion Layao, a radio journalist and local politician gunned down on 8 April near his home in Lacson, on the outskirts of Davao City (on Mindanao island), the *Mindanao Times* has reported that his widow, Rica Layao, was threatened at gunpoint on 24 April by Lacson police officer Gerardo Padillo after she said he might have been involved in the murder. Padillo was immediately arrested.

In the northern city of Olongapo, **Mahatma Randy Datu**, a reporter for the Manila-based *Pilipino Star Ngayon (Filipino Star Today)*, was openly threatened by Olongapo police chief Christopher Tambungan when he and other reporters went to cover a hostage-taking on 3 April.

Tambungan had asked the media to come at the hostage-taker's request but, when he saw Datu, he shouted: "What's your name? What are you doing here? You are not needed here." He seized him by the shoulders and physically ejected him from the compound where the hostages were being held. Datu's account is confirmed by a radio *dzMM* reporter.

Datu filed a complaint against Tambungan on 23 April accusing him of threats, coercion and slander. Rejecting Datu's account, Tambungan said he simply asked the journalists to leave because they were upsetting the hostage-taker. He went on to accuse Datu and fellow *Pilipino Star Ngayon* reporter **Alex Galang** of writing "negative" articles about him. Datu had previously

accused Tambungan of taking bribes from night-club owners.

Despite all the threats to journalists, President Aquino's address to the Philippine Press Institute's annual National Press Forum on 23 April emphasized what he called the media's "negativism," which he said was hurting tourism and the country's image. His comments were immediate condemned by the *National Union of Journalists of the Philippines*.

There has been no let-up in the level of violence against the media in the Philippines in 2012. Three journalists have been killed since the start of the year and two others have survived murder attempts. The violence is often the work of paramilitary groups and private militias, which are on the list of "predators of freedom of information" that Reporters Without Borders issued this month.

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