



Philippines

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Decade-long impunity undermines justice in the Philippines

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and its member organization, the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocate (PAHRA), have been closely monitoring the progress of a crucial case on the enforced disappearance of six contractual workers of the Paper Industries Corporation of the Philippines (PICOP) in October 2000. More than a decade later, a pre-trial hearing was scheduled today but was postponed due to an official function called by the regional prosecutor's office. A key former soldier witness, former Sgt. Esequias Duyogan, was due to testify against soldiers from his military unit that he identified in 2007 as the main perpetrators in the kidnapping and killing of the six workers in Trento, Agusan del Sur province.

FIDH and PAHRA recall that Corporal Rodrigo Billones of the Philippine Army's 62nd Infantry Battalion was already convicted by the provincial Regional Trial Court in July 2008 and was sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in the kidnapping and illegal detention of the six workers. In 2009, the families filed a case of multiple murder against the 12 officers and members of the 62nd Infantry Battalion, 8th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army, who were identified by former Sgt. Duyogan. Bringing the perpetrators of these disappearances to justice will be a major breakthrough in the context of persistent impunity for serious crimes, especially those implicating members of the armed forces and the police. There is currently no special law defining and criminalizing enforced disappearances in the Philippines while a number of bills on enforced disappearances are pending before the 15th Congress.

FIDH and PAHRA are deeply concerned by reports of threats and harassment, by soldiers and other unidentified persons, against former Sgt. Duyogan, his family, the families of the victims and human rights activists working on the case. Such acts not only undermine the legal proceedings but also illustrate the danger for all those fighting against impunity in the country: the potential risk of witnesses being eliminated or silenced is high. This risk is aggravated by the on-going lack of independence, funding and credibility of the Witness Protection Program, a serious weakness identified by FIDH, PAHRA and the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) in their joint report in 2008 [\[1\]](#) .

"The Aquino administration came to power on a platform of change," said Souhayr Belhassen, FIDH president, "this case will test the president's commitment and determination to uphold his many promises of delivering justice and ensuring accountability for serious human rights violations. The Philippine government must take all necessary measures to ensure the adequate protection of the witnesses and their families, and make enforced disappearance an offence under its criminal law".

[1] See Terrorism and Human Rights in the Philippines: Fighting Terror or Terrorizing?, by FIDH, PAHRA and IRCT, April 2008. Available at <http://www.fidh.org/Fighting-Terror...>

<http://www.fidh.org/Decade-long-impunity-undermines-justice-in-the>