



Center for Development Programs in the Cordillera (CDPC)
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“MORONG 43” and REALITY CHECK

The Board of Directors of the Center for Development Programs in the Cordillera (CDPC), condemns the arrest, abuse and torture, and continued detention of the “Morong 43”. We call on the GMA regime and concerned military authorities to stop continued violation of their rights and to cause their immediate release. CDPC is a network of 12 NGOs in the Cordillera with programs on community based socio economic work and sustainable agriculture, of which community based primary health care is an important component. CDPC and its network of NGOs have served Cordillera communities for the past three decades.

The “Morong 43” are a group of health professionals (doctors and nurses) and community health workers (from people’s organizations and ngos) who were on health training with a health ngo, Council for Health and Development, in early February at the resort of Dr. Melecia Velmonte, in Morong, Tanay, Rizal. It is a reality and a matter of life and death, especially in remote communities of the Philippine archipelago like interior areas in the Cordillera region; that community health workers mostly volunteers, who may not be college graduates but trained by NGO health professionals, are the providers of health services. The sad reality is that basic services namely health and education continue to be the most neglected especially in rural areas. Occasional medical missions by government and politicians and even by the AFP, are rare if ever, and are usually show off for elections or for counter insurgency. Rural communities, as well as urban slums, continue to live on the reality that their health needs are serviced by community health workers of people’s organizations (POs), NGOs, and church institutions. It is also a reality, for which they should be given awards and not harassed, that there are committed health professionals like doctors and nurses who stay and serve the people, instead of joining the bandwagon of overseas employment for greener pastures and less stressful life. They continuously train and patiently develop community health workers to make them competent and dedicated community based health workers.

This reality escapes the common sense and discernment of our increasingly callous government and its military apparatus. On February 8, 2010, about 300 combined forces of PNP and AFP under Col. Aurelio Baladad descended on the 43 health professionals and community health workers, handcuffed and blindfolded them, and herded them like criminals to Camp Capinpin, Tanay, Rizal. Their protests on the violation of their rights, including right to counsel, as well as Dr. Melecia Velmonte’s protest on the violation of her private abode, were not heeded. They would continue to be abused and their human persons violated, like by having others put down their under wear when they go to the bathroom, and being continuously handcuffed and blindfolded even under the watchful eye of fully armed military. The

Supreme Court order for habeas corpus , as per petition filed by “Morong 43” relatives who for days were not allowed to see their loved ones, was initially defied by military authorities. Such impunity and blatant violation of human rights, oppression and repression of committed health professionals and community health workers, like other development workers and activists in similar cases, and even defiance of the Supreme Court is now a revolting reality with the GMA regime.

The over all reality is a government and its apparatus being increasingly isolated from its people especially the grassroots. The increasing difference of reality from the point of view of majority of our people, and those in power as well as those who benefit from the present system, seem irreconcilable. When the government and military claims that the “Morong 43” are NPA, grassroots response is, “What if they are NPA, if they are the ones who provide health services”. What matters at the grass roots are services, particularly health, and systems that work and that meet their needs. When the military charges that the “ Morong 43” were making bombs, grassroots response is, “ Health work that gives life and bombs that cause death don’t mix ”. See, there is an ocean of difference in realities. The GMA regime and its military must explain the OPLAN Bantay Laya related arrest of “Morong 43”, as well as other crimes of death and disappearance of activists , and irresponsible adventures like “Hello Garci”, “NBN ZTE”, and others. It may start by recognizing that the present system, especially the GMA regime, is probably a failure .

It is a national reality that Philippine society is essentially unjust with a pyramid structure, where the powerful elite few control wealth and the majority are impoverished. Genuine national development and lasting justice cannot be achieved with such inequity. Where we are now, with long lasting insurgencies, we can heal and build our deeply divided nation by pursuing sincere peace talks between the GRP (Government of the Republic of the Philippines) and the NDFP (National democratic Front of the Philippines), as well as the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front). And maturity should be achieved to decisively recognize that, on any matter, the interest of the U.S.A. is not necessarily the Philippine interest. Then we can sincerely build one reality and aspire for a truly free and prosperous Filipino nation.

That is for the long term. Meanwhile, an easy step forward by GMA and others in authority, is to STOP VIOLATING THE RIGHTS OF “MORONG 43”, IMMEDIATELY RELEASE THEM FROM MILITARY CUSTODY TO THEIR FAMILIES, whose rights have as well been violated by the detention of their loved ones. A related step is to STOP HARASSMENT AND PERSECUTION of individuals, NGOs, and People’s Organizations who serve their sectors and communities.

CDPC Board of Directors, February 20, 2010