

Maguindanao massacre a heavy toll on community journalism

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KORONADAL CITY, South Cotabato -

What is now known here as the Ampatuan massacre wiped out the staff of the five-year old pioneering vernacular newsweekly *Periodico Ini* (This Periodical) based in the city and left many a news organization in five towns missing a staff or two.

Police and military officials yesterday said the total casualty list has already breached the 57th mark, with the recovery of the remains of ten more victims, three of whom were journalists.

A list pieced together by CenterLaw from interviews with victims' families and information provided by local journalists' associations show that among those confirmed dead or declared missing were at least 27 journalists.

Ten of the journalists came from General Santos City; another ten from Koronadal City; four from Tacurong City; two from Davao City, and one from Cotabato City.

Other news reports however say up to 37 journalists were on that convoy.

Below is the list compiled by the Center, which also showed, with the exception of two cases, the journalists' news organization:

1. Ian Subang, Socsargen Today, General Santos City
2. Lea Dalmacio, Socsargen News, General Santos City
3. Gina De la Cruz, Saksi News, General Santos City
4. Maritess Cablitas, News Focus, General Santos City
5. Rosell Morales, News Focus, General Santos City
6. Henry Araneta, Radio DZRH, General Santos City
7. Neneng Montaño, Saksi News, General Santos City
8. Alejandro "Bong" Reblando, Manila Bulletin, General Santos City
9. Victor Nuñez, UNTV, General Santos City
10. Mark Gilbert "Mac-Mac" Arriola, General Santos City
11. Bal Cachuela, Punto News, Koronadal City
12. Ernesto "Bart" Maravilla, Bombo Radyo, Koronadal City
13. Ronie Perante, Gold Star Daily correspondent, Koronadal City
14. Joel Parcon, Prontiera News, Koronadal City
15. Jun Legarte, Prontiera News, Koronadal City
16. Rey Merisco, Periodico Ini, Koronadal City
17. John Caniban, Periodico Ini, Koronadal City
18. Arturo Betia, Periodico Ini, Koronadal City

19. Noel Decena, Periodico Ini, Koronadal City
20. Rani Razon, Periodico Ini, Koronadal City
21. Jhoy Duhay, Gold Star Daily, Tacurong City
22. Andy Teodoro, Central Mindanao Inquirer, Tacurong City
23. Jimmy Cabilo, Midland Review, Tacurong City
24. Reynaldo "Bebot" Momay, Midland Review, Tacurong City
25. Napoleon Salaysay, Mindanao Gazette, Cotabato City
26. Jun Gatchalian, Davao City
27. Lindo Lupogan, Davao City

Of the 27, two men - Momay and Lupogan - have remained missing, according to interviews with members of their families. So far, CenterLaw has been able to confer with the families of 12 of the slain journalists on legal assistance. Two local journalists' association pledged to assist CenterLaw reach out to more families.

A periodical's entire staff wiped out

"I did not know my whole staff had gone to join that fateful trip," said Ferdinand Solinap, the 40-year old editor and publisher of the newsweekly, which is published in Hiligaynon, a Visayan language spoken by a good majority of this city's 160,000 residents.

On Monday, some 100 gunmen linked to Maguindanao Governor Andal Ampatuan allegedly abducted in broad daylight a convoy of aides and relatives of a rival politician, Esmael "Toto" Mangudadatu, and a group of journalists, as they were travelling in a six-vehicle convoy headed for the local Commission on Elections office to formally file Mangudadatu's certificate of candidacy for the post now occupied by Ampatuan.

Hours later, news broke out that the convoy had been massacred - said to be the single deadliest attack on journalists in modern history.

Solinap and his wife Normalita, 38, founded the *Periodico Ini* newsweekly after years of working as a sales manager for another weekly.

The enormity of the situation was brought home to the couple after they took stock of what the carnage cost the newsweekly and their loyal readers: the newsweekly lost John Caniban, bureau chief in nearby Sultan Kudarat town, Arturo Betia, marketing manager, Noel Decena, circulation manager who also doubles as a reporter, Rani Razon, sales manager and Rey Merisco, columnist.

Many of the slain journalists worked in small community papers dependent largely on paid legal notices, with some of them putting out no more than 50 copies of their publications week after week.

According to news reports, the gunmen fired at the victims pointblank, with some of them trussed up, tortured or mutilated. The suspects later on dumped or buried their victims in mass graves scattered all over a small area in a town named after the incumbent governor's family name.

Mangudadatu was quoted in news reports as saying that the body of his murdered wife had been mutilated; a sister and an aunt who joined his wife in the convoy were both pregnant.

"My wife's private parts were slashed four times, after which they fired a bullet into it," he told journalists in an interview. "They speared both of her eyes, shot both her breasts, cut off her feet, fired into her mouth. I could not begin to describe the manner by which they treated her."

Haphazard evidence handling

The chief worry now is the uphill battle crime investigators are now fighting against the elements as the political and security crisis entered the third day - official autopsies on the recovered victims' remains have been painstakingly slow and an acute lack of sophisticated forensic equipment and facilities, made worse by the haphazard handling by investigators of the crime scene, has made evidence preservation essential to a successful prosecution of the perpetrators doubly difficult.

Officials of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) who visited the crime scene were appalled to witness police Scene of the Crime Operatives (SOCO), assisted by government troops, use a backhoe to dig up the remains of victims allegedly buried by their killers in a newly-discovered grave in Barangay Salman, Ampatuan town. They arrived just in time to see the backhoe's claw unearth a woman's bloodied and broken body. The authorities pulled out from the same mass grave the remains of DZRH's Henry Araneta, and UNTV's Victor Nuñez and Mark Gilbert "Mac-Mac" Arriola, it was subsequently reported.

Racing against time: complaints and confusion

Families of the victims, frustrated by the patently disorganized response of government agencies to the tragedy, confronted Jesus Dureza, the special envoy sent by Philippine President Arroyo to condole with them, during a dialogue at the Casa Romana hotel here.

"Why is it taking them so long to conduct an autopsy on the remains of our loved ones?" said Elliver M. Cablitas, whose wife Maritess, a reporter connected with the News Focus newspaper based in General Santos City, died in the massacre.

Five government doctors - three from the National Bureau of Investigation and two from the Philippine National Police Crime Laboratory Service - had been working round-the-clock to conduct autopsies on the recovered remains of the victims. As of noon time yesterday, they have completed work on only ten of the bodies brought in from the crime scene 45 kilometers away in Ampatuan town.

At the rate they're going, said Cablitas, the remains of his wife would have long been decomposed before the government doctors get the chance to do an autopsy.

The lack of refrigeration facilities to keep the remains from decomposition is complicating the grim task of identifying the victims and preserving evidence, according to Dr. Benito Molino, a veteran forensics investigator engaged by CenterLaw to assist authorities in investigative work.

"We have to move faster," said Molino, who has spent many years in human rights work as a medical expert for the Medical Action Group and the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearance (AFAD). "The government has not fielded enough medico-legal officers to do the autopsies."

Human remains recovered from the crime scene are taken to four funeral homes in the city - Allen Memorial Homes, Zubiri Funeral Homes, Southern Funeral Homes and Saint Peter Funeral Homes.

But Dr. Molino said he visited the morgues of Allen Memorial Homes and Southern Funeral Homes and on the basis of what he saw there, concluded that they are not adequately equipped to handle the kind of emergency presented by the Ampatuan massacre.

"I pity the government doctors who had to do the gruesome task," he said. "They have so much work with so little." He said as it often happens in the Philippines, government investigative agencies do not have adequate facilities to preserve human remains recovered in crime investigations.

The Ampatuan massacre is no exception. "They could have at least used lime to slow down the

process of decomposition but I did not see any indication that they did that," said Dr. Molino.

The authorities could have also run comprehensive X-rays on the recovered remains to assist investigators in locating bullet fragments as well as establishing bullet trajectories, considering that many of the victims were noted to have sustained extensive bullet wounds.

But this very simple procedure will certainly have proven to be prohibitive for often cash-strapped government investigative agencies to perform, he said.

Dr. Molino said he found it incredulous that no one from the police immediately informed the families of victims to bring items that would help them identify their loved ones' remains, such as photographs and dental and medical records. In fact, until yesterday, many of them remained clueless about the proper procedure to take.

Some had the good luck of being able to identify loved ones through the clothes, ring or shoes they wore to their deaths. Others looked for well-known physical identifying marks on their loved ones' bodies - such as moles on their faces - to identify them. But this would have been difficult, if not impossible, to do, in cases where the remains have already reached an advanced stage of decomposition.

In many instances, after identifying the remains of their loved ones at the crime scene, families could not trace to which morgue or funeral home the victims' remains were taken, thus adding to the confusion.

It was certainly a common complaint at the dialogue with the victims' families presided by Dureza, an assistant press secretary, and local social welfare officials struggled to cope with the litany of complaints.

Dureza admitted such was the case, and noted that at the Zubiri funeral homes for example, four of the 14 bodies brought there by recovery teams have yet to be identified.

Dureza authorized the release through the local social welfare office financial assistance to the victims from the national government in the amount of P10,000 (P46.9 to USD 1). He also gave assurances that the national government will shoulder other funeral costs.

CenterLaw later took up in a dinner meeting the concerns about the haphazard way in which evidence vital to the successful prosecution of the case is being handled with State Prosecutor Leo Dacera and Kidapawan City Prosecutor Al Calica, both of whom, according to reports, had just been tapped by the justice department to prepare the case against the suspects.

The government prosecutors said they welcome assistance from lawyers' groups in the investigation and prosecution of the case.

The CenterLaw is now looking to lease a refrigerated van to store the recovered human remains from Ampatuan town and a suitable space with a generous supply of water where autopsies may be conducted.

Shock, disbelief, anger

Shock, disbelief and anger had by turns swept over a closely-knit community of local journalists in the region.

"This is just too much," said Joseph Jubelag, Manila Standard Today correspondent based in General

Santos City. He narrowly-missed the deadly convoy after a hotel incident gave him and colleague Aquiles Zoño of the Philippine Daily Inquirer the goose bumps and convinced them to break off it.

Jubelag, whose family runs a small printing press, had been tasked by colleagues to oversee the repatriation of the remains of General Santos City-based journalists killed in the Ampatuan massacre back to their home city.

“Many of us feel like we have lost our very own,” he said. “Our problem is that no autopsy has been done yet on our colleague’s remains so that we cannot yet bring them home.”

Jubelag expressing his anger at the government’s continuing failure to put a stop to the impunity that has targeted journalists in the Philippines. “When will this stop?”

Around 200 people attended a candlelit indignation rally at the city rotunda early yesterday evening, punctuated by messages of solidarity from local officials, church leaders, and various journalists’ organizations.

At the protests, many voiced out fears of a whitewash in the investigations, taking special note that the Ampatuans are a close political ally of the Arroyos.

But for Federico Solinap, editor and publisher of the weekly Periodico Ini, no massacre can dissuade him from pursuing his vision of journalism. “I remain undaunted,” he said, adding that he and his wife continue to encourage their three children to seriously consider taking up journalism as a profession and continuing the family heritage.

as of 11/26/2009 3:32 PM
