

Philippines: Surge of Journalist Killings, Justice Failures - Entrenched Rights Problems Demand Government Action

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(Manila) – The Philippine government failed to match its rhetoric in support of human rights in 2013 with meaningful action to end impunity for extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances, Human Rights Watch said today in its *World Report 2014*.

The tenuous nature of human rights protections in the Philippines is reflected in the surge of killings of journalists with little accountability, Human Rights Watch said. Twelve journalists were killed in 2013, bringing the total number of Filipino journalists and media workers killed to 26 since President Benigno Aquino III took office in June 2010. In only six of those 24 cases have police arrested suspects. In May, the Committee to Protect Journalists designated the Philippines as the third “most dangerous country” in the world for journalists, after Iraq and Somalia.

“The body count of Filipino journalists speaks volumes for the wide gap between the Aquino government’s rhetoric in addressing rights problems and the reality on the ground,” said Phelim Kine, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

In the 667-page *World Report 2014*, its 24th edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in more than 90 countries. Syria’s widespread killings of civilians elicited horror but few steps by world leaders to stop it, Human Rights Watch said. A reinvigorated doctrine of “responsibility to protect” seems to have prevented some mass atrocities in Africa. Majorities in power in Egypt and other countries have suppressed dissent and minority rights. And Edward Snowden’s revelations about US surveillance programs reverberated around the globe.

The government’s failure to bring to justice those responsible for the killing of journalists highlighted the climate of impunity for rights abusers in the Philippines, Human Rights Watch said. In the only two cases in which the authorities have secured convictions for serious rights abuses – the killings of radio commentator and environmentalist Gerry Ortega on January 24, 2011, and journalist Rowell Endrinal on February 11, 2004 – the masterminds of those crimes remained at large.

However, the Philippines government did make progress in one of the country’s most emblematic cases of impunity. In October, Philippine Army Maj. Harry Baliaga Jr., a prime suspect in the enforced disappearance of farmer rights activist Jonas Burgos, surrendered to a Manila court for his alleged role in the April 2007 abduction.

The fighting in September 2013 between Muslim rebels and government forces in the southern city of Zamboanga resulted in violations of international law by both sides, including the use of human shields by the rebels. Some detainees in government custody, including several children, described to Human Rights Watch being tortured and otherwise ill-treated while being held.

A much-vaunted initiative by the government to address impunity – the creation in 2012 of a so-

called “superbody” to expedite the investigation and prosecution of cases of extrajudicial killings – remained inactive in 2013 even as new cases were reported by domestic human rights groups.

“The Aquino administration has said all the right things about ending abuses in the Philippines, but what’s missing is the political will to translate those promises into action,” Kine said.

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<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/21/philippines-surge-journalist-killings-justice-failures>