

# Philippines: ‘The pain won’t go away, but it’ll give me comfort’: Kin of drug war victims find hope in ICC probe

Monday 20 September 2021, by [GUDA Kenneth Roland](#), [SALAZAR Cherry](#) (Date first published: 18 September 2021).

## Families who lost loved ones in President Duterte’s ‘war on drugs’ cheer the International Criminal Court’s decision to begin a full investigation into the brutal campaign

Emily Soriano, 52, cried tears of joy when she learned that the [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#) [has authorized a full investigation](#) into President Rodrigo Duterte’s ruthless campaign against illegal drugs.

*“Sobrang tuwa ko. Hindi lang ako. Lahat ng pamilya na nawalan ng buhay (I am overjoyed. It’s not just me, but all of the families who lost loved ones),”* said Soriano, who joined a group of mothers who had lost children to the so-called “drug war” in speaking out against police operations and support each other’s quest for justice.

Soriano’s son, Angelito, was killed just months after Duterte became president in 2016. She said he happened to be at the wrong place on the night of Dec. 28, 2016. He was at a neighborhood holiday party when armed men arrived and indiscriminately shot at people.

Soriano believes the shooters were after the owner of the house, who was rumored to be linked to illegal drugs. She said they shot everyone unable to run after a warning shot was fired. Seven were killed, including a pregnant woman.

Five years into Duterte’s presidency, over 8,000 people suspected to be drug dealers or addicts have been killed in raids. Human rights groups said the actual number was thousands more.

In its [decision](#) to approve a request to begin the investigation into the crime against humanity of murder, a three-judge panel of the ICC cited “widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population” that took place “pursuant to or in furtherance of a state policy.”

### ‘There’s a chance to get justice now’

Duterte made no qualms encouraging cops to kill suspected drug dealers and users, even bragging once that many dead bodies would be dumped in Manila Bay and fish would have a feast on them.

The ICC investigation will look into killings not just during Duterte’s presidency – from July 1, 2016 until March 16, 2019, when the country’s withdrawal from the Rome Statute took effect – but also when he was vice mayor and then mayor of Davao City from November 1, 2011 to June 30, 2016. The investigation will determine if the ICC will proceed to a trial.

Like Angelito, there are many cases of mistaken identity and indiscriminate killings in Duterte’s drug war.

The death of 17-year-old student Kian Delos Santos in August 2017 symbolized the brutality of the campaign. The teenager was dragged to a dark alley by police operatives wearing civilian clothes. He was shot in the head twice as he begged for his life. His last words to the police — “*Tama na po! May exam pa ako bukas!* (Please stop! I have an exam tomorrow!)” — roused anger nationwide.

CCTV footage documented how Delos Santos was dragged to the alley, leading to the [guilty sentence of three police officers](#). It was the first of such convictions since the drug war began.

Randy delos Santos, an uncle of Kian, knows they won convictions against cops because the case became so high-profile.

*“Nagkaroon na ba ng sumunod na kaso na gaya ng kay Kian na nabigyan ng pansin? Sa tingin mo ba, kung walang celebrity at malalaking tao na bumisita, mapapansin ba ang kaso ni Kian (Were there other cases that received as much attention? Do you think, if there were no celebrities and powerful people who visited Kian’s wake, his case would be resolved)?”*

### **Victory in itself**

The ICC’s full investigation is a victory in itself even at this stage, said Consie Lozano, who lost two brothers to the anti-drug operations.

*“Pinapakita niya na kung sa sariling bansa ay hindi kaya, may iba pang instrumento sa labas ng bansa sa pagkuha ng hustisya (We may not get justice in our own country, but there are other instruments outside the country that can give us justice).”*

Duterte’s anti-drug operations was a war on the poor, she said. *“Sa halip na tulungan lang ang mga tao na may problema sa droga at sa kahirapan, sistematiko ang pagpatay sa mahihirap na mga tao na may problema sa droga (Instead of helping people who have drug problems, they launched a systematic murder of poor people struggling with drug addiction).”*

Lozano’s brothers were drug users, but she said they “surrendered” and cooperated with the barangay at the beginning of the campaign in the hope that they would be spared. On May 12, 2017, a family member identified their bodies from a morning TV news report on the latest death toll from the drug war. Many others who surrendered to the barangay were also killed, she said.

What was strange, Lozano said, was how cops kept returning to their home year after year to ask about his brothers. *“Kahit patay na, may mga nagpapakilalang pulis. Minsan may kasamang tanod. Hindi tumitigil. Hindi ba talaga nila alam na pinatay na nila ‘yung dalawa (Even after their deaths, there were people introducing themselves as cops. They were sometimes accompanied by village watchmen. They didn’t stop. Did they not really know that they had killed them both)?”*

Soriano and Lozana were among those who responded to the ICC’s call to express their views, concerns, and expectations from the investigation.

*“Hindi na maibabalik ang buhay ng anak ko. Ang sakit, hindi mawawala. Pero ang ligaya na makamit ang hustisya, napakalaki sa kaluwagan ng pag-iisip ko (They cannot bring back my son. The pain will never go away, but it will make us happy if we can get justice for his death. It will bring me comfort),”* said Soriano.

Palace spokesperson Harry Roque on Sept. 15 said the government would not cooperate with the probe and even bar ICC investigators from entering the country to collect evidence.

Earlier, Roque expressed confidence the ICC’s preliminary investigation, which commenced in 2018,

would not move forward to a full investigation.

**‘Take everything that makes them happy’**

Delos Santos knows more people, other than the three cops convicted over his nephew’s death, should be held responsible. *“Masaya kami dahil naumpisahan na ang imbestigasyon. Maraming haharapin na hadlang pero sana magpatuloy* (We are happy because they have started the investigation. There will be more challenges, but I hope they can pursue it),” he said.

Delos Santos wanted to know: *“Saan ba nanggaling ang utos ng mga ito? ‘Yun ang ugat. Kasi ang pagpapanagot sa mga ito, nandoon ‘yung hustisya* (Where did they get their orders? We will get justice when these people are held accountable).”

As far as Lozano was concerned, the answer was clear. *“Kung di naman nagsalita si Duterte na patayin ang mga adik, dapat buhay pa ‘yung mga tao e* (If Duterte didn’t issue the order to kill drug addicts, our loved ones would still be alive today).”

She called for life imprisonment for everyone involved in implementing the drug war. She wanted their assets confiscated if it was true they earned rewards for the lives they took in the name of the war on drugs. *“Kunin ang lahat ng nagpapasaya sa kanila ngayon* (Take everything that makes them happy),” she said.

But she also wanted the ICC probe to serve as a warning to the country’s future leaders. *“Magbigay ng leksyon [para sa] nagnanais maging presidente at gusto ng ganito ring patakaran* (May it serve as a lesson for people aspiring to become president and want to implement the same policy).”

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Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ)

<https://pcij.org/article/6881/drug-war-victims-kin-find-hope-icc-probe>