

Journalism Asia Forum 2010 tackles impunity and press freedom

The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) and in cooperation with the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) conducted the Journalism Asia Forum 2010 on November 23 at The Manila Hotel to discuss experiences on impunity and media press freedom of different Southeast Asian countries as well as experience shared by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Mr. Frank La Rue. The CMFR reported that they have recorded 175 cases of killing Filipino journalists/ media workers since 1986. Of the 175 journalists/ media workers killed since 1986, 118 were killed because of their work. Seventy nine out of the 118 work- related cases happened during Arroyo administration (February 2001- June 30, 2010). This includes the 32 journalists/ media practitioners killed in the Ampatuan Massacre which was commemorating the 1st anniversary of the massacre on the same date.

Atty. Jose Manuel Diokno and Atty. Eric F. Mallonga spoke about the Philippine experience and the proposed civil and administrative remedies to counter impunity and human rights violations. Atty. Diokno called for revisiting the Witness Protection Program of the Philippines. Currently, there is no mechanism to provide perpetuation of testimony for witnesses. He proposed that witnesses should be given the opportunity to testify and give their statements immediately and thereafter provide them new identity and relocation instead of depriving their freedom through government's housing programs. He also said that justice can be best served against public officials or any accused by means of filing a civil case which only needs preponderance of evidence instead of filing criminal case that requires evidence proving guilt beyond reasonable doubt. He also suggested that since the United States (U.S.) through Protection of Torture Victim Act can litigate foreign cases, victims can pursue the case in other countries like the U.S. On the other hand, Atty. Diokno criticized some military operations in hinterlands against insurgents because those operations constituted cultural destruction. He also pushed for the immediate action to clarify through judicial interpretation the criteria of torture as defined as "deliberate infliction of pain" stated in the Anti- Torture Act.

UN Rapporteur like Mr. Frank La Rue shared news of impunity and suppression of press freedom in Guatemala and Mexico. He said that there should be an emergency protection mechanism for journalists. La Rue also advocated for decriminalization of speech such as oral defamations and libel being filed against journalists and public officials though with few exceptions. In the Philippine context, he affirmed that the Ampatuan Massacre in Maguindanao attributed in making the Philippines rank as the most violent country in the world. Speakers from Thailand, and Indonesia expressed that they might not have the quantity of impunity like in the Philippines but they have the same degree of impunity. Suppressing press freedom in their countries is intense because of the practice of self imposed censorship of journalists in reporting against people in the government and those with economic power. Political or partisan journalists also prevail therefore escalating political conflicts and impunity in their countries.

Along with NAMFREL, organization and agency reporters in the forum included the Supreme Court, Department of Justice (DOJ), Philippine National Police (PNP), international organizations like the Sweden International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Open Society Institute (OSI) and media representatives from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia and Burma.

HOR Committee on Suffrage and Electoral Reforms approves early voting of media members

A consolidated measure allowing the early voting of members of media was approved on November 23 by the House of Representative Committee on Suffrage and Electoral Reforms. The bill intended to set a separate a voting date to members of the media, who are usually on duty during election date and therefore could not vote. The bill will now be sent to plenary for debates. The panel consolidated the twin bills filed by Bayan Muna Representatives Teddy Casino, Neri Colmenares and Cagayan de Oro City Representative Rufus Rodriguez and Abante Mindanao partylist Representative Maximo Rodriguez. House Bill No. 1960 or the "Early Voting for Media Act of 2010," will give media practitioners assigned in areas other than their polling places the right to participate in the elections through the early voting.

Early or advance voting is a practice of many countries to allow voters to vote prior to the scheduled Election Day. This law intensifies the right of suffrage and voters empowerment. Along with such move to pass a bill supporting media to cast their votes early, the Comelec and the House should review and also pass the stalled bill on amendments to Absentee Voting filed in the 14th Congress to broaden voters participation and access

Medicine Monitoring Project Updates: Regional Consultation Meetings in Ilocos, Batangas, and Davao

As part of the on-going Medicine Monitoring Project (MMP) of NAMFREL and the Department of Health (DOH), representatives from the NAMFREL Secretariat have been visiting DOH managed hospitals and regional Centers for Health Development (CHDs) all over the Philippines. The aim of these meetings is to discuss the components and objectives of the project, and to formally introduce new NAMFREL observer-volunteers with their counterpart hospital officials and personnel. Invited to the meetings are volunteers who will sit as observers in the procurement activities, heads of the DOH managed hospitals and medical centers, regional directors of the CHDs, the Bids and Awards Committee members, and other concern hospital personnel like the Administrative, Pharmacy and Supply Officers.

In the discussions, NAMFREL was able to stress the importance of securing the support from partner hospitals and CHDs. Among the areas of support include the access to pertinent procurement and bidding documents to be used as basis for evaluation and assessment of the procurement up to the contract implementation process. So far, meetings have been held at the Mariano Marcos Memorial Hospital in Laoag City; Batangas Regional Hospital in Batangas City, and the Southern Philippines Medical Center in Davao City. In these meetings, NAMFREL was assured of the hospitals' support for the project and will continue to invite NAMFREL in upcoming procurement activities.

One of the principal objectives of the Medicine Monitoring Project is to ensure transparency in the procurement, distribution, and inventory-warehousing not only of drugs and medicine; but also of goods, services and infrastructure projects of the DOH. This project also aims to promote efficiency in the use of government funds, and hopefully be a factor in lowering the prices of medicines. In the few weeks, NAMFREL will continue to conduct consultation meetings in the other hospitals and CHDs that are covered by the project.

[Source: ABS CBN News, American Chronicle, Manila Bulletin, NAMFREL data]

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