

AI INDEX: ASA 35/05/95

Embargoed for 0001 HRS GMT ON 11 JULY 1995

PHILIPPINES: FATHER ROMANO SYMBOLIZES HORROR OF "DISAPPEARANCES"

On the 10th anniversary of the "disappearance" of Father Rosaleo "Rudy" Romano, Amnesty International urges the Philippine president to finally resolve what happened to Father Romano as well as 1,600 others who remain "disappeared".

Amnesty International made a personal appeal today to President Fidel Ramos, asking him to make sure such human rights violations do not continue and to resolve the fate of Father Romano and other "disappearance" victims, or "desaparecidos".

"What happened to Father Romano symbolizes the horror of a 'disappearance'. Families still do not know what happened to their loved ones, but only know that justice has been denied," Amnesty International said.

Hundreds of people who suffered the same fate as Father Romano were abducted by security forces after expressing their opposition to government policy, yet no one appears to have ever been successfully prosecuted in the Philippines for committing those "disappearances", the organization said.

Father Romano, a Redemptorist priest and political activist, was kidnapped in the middle of the afternoon of 11 July 1985 while riding his motorcycle through Cebu City. Eyewitnesses reported that a car with government markings blocked his route, backed up by heavily armed men on motorcycles. Plucked from the street, Father Romano has never been seen again.

Two main suspects in Father Romano's "disappearance", identified by eyewitnesses as members of the army's Military Intelligence Group, were acquitted in court martial proceedings two years later. Members of the security forces were immune from prosecution by civil courts until 1991 under Presidential Decree 1850 (PD 1850).

Amnesty International welcomed the repeal of PD 1850, but is concerned at the lack of successful prosecutions in "disappearance" cases since then.

Last year's anniversary of Father Romano's abduction was marked by the unveiling of a monument to the memory of the "disappeared". There are 1,600 names engraved on the monument, with 759 names of those who vanished under the rule of Ferdinand Marcos up to 1986. Another 830 names on the monument represent victims of "disappearance" during the administration of Corazon Aquino, which lasted from 1986 to 1992.

Another 16 names are people who were abducted since Fidel Ramos was elected president in 1992. Five more names of the recently "disappeared" are still to be engraved on the monument, which stands in Baclaran, Manila.

"The responsibility to uncover the truth behind all these "disappearances" lies fully with the present government", Amnesty International said. "The Ramos government should avoid creating the impression of a cover-up, especially since many of its members were also influential under past regimes."

President Ramos was acting armed forces chief of staff under Marcos and headed the Philippine Constabulary. He rose to become Secretary of National Defence under Aquino with control over military policy.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Philippine legal system is ineffective in tracing those who have "disappeared", punishing the perpetrators, and giving redress to victims. The courts make a "presumption of regularity" in favour of the security forces if they simply deny holding someone. The burden is placed on the complainant to prove that the missing person is detained, often at great personal risk.

Amnesty International urges the government to provide an effective protection programme for witnesses, to prosecute those who are found to have made a Philippine citizen "disappear", and to provide redress for the victims and their families.

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