

By JOSEPH G. LARIOSA

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CHICAGO, Illinois (*JGLi*) – Human-rights groups are pooling their resources to come up with a legal-defense fund to file a civil suit against the Philippine government. The coalition blames the Philippine government for the wholesale killing of 65 victims, 31 of them journalists, in what is now called the Maguindanao Massacre. The legal-defense fund was the result of a Filipino Social Justice Forum II that addressed human-rights issues in the Philippines. The forum was held last Sunday, Feb. 21, in Chicago, Illinois.

At the same time, the same group is urging the United States Congress to stop the release of the annual \$135-Million U.S. foreign aid to the Philippines if the Philippine government cannot insure a “thorough, transparent, and independent investigation and prosecution of those who are responsible for the massacre” as contained in a joint U.S. House and Senate Resolution 218 passed last Dec. 8.

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A group of Filipino-American delegates from Chicago is planning to travel to the Philippines to get an update on the investigation of the massacre believed to be the single biggest mass murder of journalists in the world.

Pastor Jerry M. Miller of the Chicago-based Edison Park United Methodist Church presented a report to Filipino Americans and their friends following his volunteer mission to the Philippines in February 2007, 2009 and this year.

In his last visit to the Philippines, Miller discussed the status of the massacre investigation with Atty. Harry Roque and Romel Bagares of the Center for International Law that was deputized by the Commission on Human Rights to conduct an investigation. His meeting with Roque was videotaped and was shown to the forum participants.

Acting as facilitator at the forum was Reynaldo C. Lopez of the Manila-based Christian Peacemaker Teams, who went to Maguindanao to personally conduct a fact-finding investigation of the massacre as representative of the CPT. Lopez was a long-time human rights advocate in Chicago before returning to the Philippines.

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Lopez also disclosed the intrusion of the U.S. in Mindanao, which has a big presence of natural gas, and its effort to protect its interest, as Mindanao sea lanes are important routes, where oil tankers run through.

Jerry Clarito of Alliance of Filipinos for Immigration Rights and Empowerment (AFIRE) was the moderator.

P astor Miller cited three factors that contributed to the tragedy.

One of them is the century-old “rido” or clan feuds in the region that has claimed the lives of 798 people and injuries to 104 others from 1994 to 2004, citing the study of the Asian Foundation.

Second is the culture of impunity. Of the 7,000 killings and abductions that have taken place under the Arroyo regime, justice has seldom been served.

And third is fear on the part of the victim of securing justice under the government of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who would not have been elected without the support and votes of the

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Ampatuan clan. Judges refuse to handle the case. It took a woman judge to try the case.

The imposition of martial law in Maguindanao complicated the case as it was deemed unconstitutional because it was not based on rebellion or invasion. It also made it harder to gather evidence against the perpetrators as the “crime scene was contaminated before independent inspectors arrived.”

The Reverend Miller quoted Roque as saying there was conclusive evidence that the Philippine Army, the Philippine National Police and deputized armed civilians were involved in the massacre.

Abbey Eusebio, constituent advocate of Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (D-9th-IL), attended the forum. She said she is going to brief Congresswoman Schakowsky to follow through with the Philippine government on the provisions of House Concurrent Res. 218. The resolution condemned the “culture of impunity that continues to exist among clans, politicians, armed elements ... and calls for a thorough transparent and independent investigation and prosecution of those who are responsible for the massacre.”

Miller said the U.S. gives over \$135-M to the Philippine government every year, two-thirds of this amount goes to Mindanao for livelihood services and re-integration of ex-combatants. He said Congress should ask the Philippine government if this money is being spent “for arming and deputizing civilians.”

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The event was made possible through a grant from the Fellowship of Asian Americans and the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church (GBCSUMC) and was sponsored by Edison Park United Methodist Church (www.edisonparkumc.com), Alliance of Filipinos for Immigration Rights and Empowerment (AFIRE) (www.afirechicago.org), CIRCA-Pintig (www.circayouththeater.org), National Association of Filipino American United Methodists (NAFAUM) (www.nafaum-paglago.org), and Fellowship of Asian Americans. (lariosa_jos@sbcglobal.net)

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