

Submission of GMA Watch: A Network for Human Rights, Government Accountability, and Justice in the Philippines

For session on the Philippines scheduled for April 2008

GMA Watch's submission will focus on the Philippine Government's official blacklist which includes 504 names of individuals from over 50 countries. The blacklist includes individuals representing US-based organizations such as Church World Service, the Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, the National Lawyers Guild, and the Center for Constitutional Rights. It also includes names of several members of US civil society organization BAYAN USA and former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Both BAYAN USA and Ramsey Clark are conveners of GMA Watch.

Filipino-Americans under the alliance BAYAN USA and our allies and supporters first became aware of a so-called Philippine immigration watchlist or blacklist in December 2006, around the time the Arroyo government was hosting the ASEAN (Alliance of South East Asian Nations) Summit in Cebu City. Although the summit ended up not pushing through, many grassroots initiatives by BAYAN USA's mother alliance, BAYAN Philippines took place in order to counter the ASEAN and educate the public on the devastating effects of neoliberal globalization. Delegates and allies of BAYAN USA were part of these initiatives and were also in Cebu at the time.

The first well-known victim of the blacklist was Washington DC lawyer Brian Campbell of the International Labor Right Fund. Fortunately, the BAYAN USA delegation was able to enter the Philippines without any form of harassment or recognition by Philippine authorities. BAYAN USA secretary-general Berna Ellorin was able to leave the Philippine smoothly for the US in January 2007.

In preparation for a Philippine peace delegation going to the US in March, Ms. Ellorin was informed her name was included the blacklist. It wasn't until April 2007 that Ms. Ellorin saw the actual list for the first time.

What Ms. Ellorin found most disturbing was that the cover page of the list, issued by the Philippine Department of Justice Secretary Norberto Gonzalez, stated that the following individuals listed were to "be watched" due to links to terrorist groups Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Knowing this was a ludicrous and baseless accusation, Ms. Ellorin informed the rest the executive committee of BAYAN USA as well others she knew on the list.

The other names Ms. Ellorin recognized were names of other advocates and personages who had either (1) signed a petition criticizing the Arroyo administration, (2) written a solidarity statement denouncing the extrajudicial killings, (3) visited the Philippines to investigate human rights violations, or (4) participated in a rally or like-action.

Thus it appears the blacklist includes individuals who have simply criticized the Philippine Government's human rights record. According to Human Rights Watch, a Philippines Foreign Affairs Department official stated that the blacklist was put together in conjunction with other countries' security agencies, and that those on the list were believed to be national security threats.

In October 2007, when the Philippine Government sent its Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita to meet with Philip Alston in New York in October 2007, Ms. Ellorin had the opportunity to confront Secretary Ermita in a

public forum hosted by the Philippine Consulate in Manhattan.

When Ms. Ellorin publicly questioned why she was included in the list of people she admired, Ermita seemed confused and unknowing of the details. When she demanded to know how the Justice Secretary came to the conclusion she had links to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Ermita defended that the list was only of individuals proven to be involved in so-called “subversive activity”. Unsatisfied with his answer, Ellorin stated she has never been proven to be a subversive, only that she is part of an active Filipino-American alliance exercising its free speech rights to speak out against the political killings and has participated in fact-finding missions to the Philippines. She questioned that the list itself was an attempt to broaden the scope of the recently-passed Anti-Terror Bill in the Philippines and quell the growing dissent abroad under the guise of national security. Ermita could not answer her remarks any further.

Since then, BAYAN USA, with the help of its allies, have been forming a broader coalition called GMA WATCH, to “turn the tables” on those being watched abroad and to keep a close monitor on the actions and policies of the Arroyo administration, which has rapidly grown unpopular in the past year alone, which public scandals of bribery, corruption, and the escalating bad press that has snowballed since United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings Philip Alston submitted a report that exposed the direct hand of the Philippine military in the killings themselves.

With regards to the blacklist, GMA Watch demands an end to all Philippine government blacklists and tactics to criminalize peaceful critics concerned about the human rights situation in the Philippines. GMA Watch also continues to demand justice for the victims of human rights violations and wishes to see the perpetrators of human rights violations be identified, apprehended and charged or prosecuted to the fullest extent. Lastly, GMA Watch is committed to raising awareness about the human rights crisis in the Philippines and is mobilizing people in the US to take action.

This year, GMA Watch participated in an effort initiated by the Ecumenical Advocacy Network to include language in the US Appropriations Bill for FY 2008 that would help to ensure that US military aid to the Philippines is not being used to further human rights abuses. Most recently, GMA Watch helped mobilize US based organizations to sign onto a letter to Congress that would

- (1) limit the amount of military aid to the Philippines to the \$11.1 million requested by the State Department in the Congressional Budget Justification; Foreign Assistance and USAID Operations FY 2008 Budget Request.
- (2) ensure that the human rights conditions (Sec. 688, H.R. 2764 EAS) are applied to the entire amount of military aid to the Philippines; and
- (3) make publicly available the reports by the Department of State requested by the Senate committee in Sec. 671 and Sec. 688 in H.R. 2764 EAS in order to promote greater transparency and understanding between the United States and the people of the Philippines.