

Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)

# AFAD

# IN 2015

A Year-End Report



# The Federation moves closer to achieving its vision of a world without *desaparecidos*

**By:** Mary Aileen D. Bacalso, AFAD Secretary-General

The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) ushered in 2015 with the 5<sup>th</sup> AFAD Congress in September 2014, which carried the theme: “Consolidating AFAD’s 17 years of struggle towards a stronger response to enforced disappearances in Asia.” This article shall feature the highlights of AFAD’s year following the Congress and the developments of the Federation as it continues to bring itself closer to its vision of a world without disappeared persons.

Enforced disappearance remains a major issue in the international front. Notably, 84 countries have submitted 42,889 outstanding cases to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID), 33 of which are Asian countries, which submitted 60 percent of the total number of cases. Yet Asia is a region that has the the least number of signatories and states parties to the United Nations Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

Considering this, it is important to note that from a Federation of 3 core group members, AFAD’s membership has grown from 3 member-organizations to 13 that are based in Bangladesh, the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste. It also has an individual member in Laos, a country where an organization of victims’ families does not exist due to repression. Conscious of the uneven organizational development of the bodies within its structure and the members’ varied political contexts, AFAD strives to push its constituents towards the same direction.





# FIRST QUARTER: Groundwork for organizational consolidation

One of AFAD's first endeavors was to participate in an international conference on enforced disappearances in Islamabad, Pakistan organized by the International Commission of Jurists. During the conference, AFAD's representatives from Kashmir, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, and Thailand reported on the phenomenon of enforced disappearances in their respective countries and expressed solidarity with their brothers and sisters in Pakistan, one of the countries that submitted the highest number of cases to the UNWGEID. AFAD also emphasized the need to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in one presentation and opened the discussion on how this convention is imperative in a country where enforced disappearances happen almost on a daily basis.

The event also provided AFAD with a good opportunity to visit the office of the Defence for Human Rights (DHR), which was its newest member-organization at that time. DHR received the AFAD representatives with sincerest hospitality and the AFAD Chairperson and Secretary-General spoke with the families of the disappeared who briefly related their stories as well. More than 15 family members of the disappeared took turns to tell their stories of horror, struggle, pain, and

unwavering hope that one day, their disappeared loved ones would be an addition to the 750 disappeared people who were returned alive after months or even years in secret detention. Those whose loved ones were disappeared and subjected to extra-judicial execution also shared their stories and hoped for justice.

Following the conference, the AFAD Council held a meeting in Bangkok, Thailand from 2-3 February 2015. Ms. Amina Masood from the DHR joined the meeting via Skype. Council members took the time to review the results of the summing up of AFAD's 17 years of struggle for a world without disappeared persons and to concretize recommendations into plans. Everyone agreed that it was important to achieve a qualitative leap in attaining organic, as well as political outcomes. Moreover, deliverables of ongoing projects were identified and contracts on new projects were discussed. AFAD considered the envisioned reunification of disappeared Timorese children in Indonesia with their biological parents in Timor-Leste as the breakthrough of the year.

With regard to research and documentation, AFAD members identified targets of 684 cases to be



AFAD's members during the conference on enforced disappearances in Islamabad, Pakistan, organized by the International Commission of Jurists.

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AFAD Chairperson Khurram Parvez, Secretary-General Mary Aileen D. Bacalso and DHR Chairperson Amina Masood Janjua during the AFAD visit to the office of Defence for Human Rights in Pakistan.



encoded into AFAD's database and 415 cases to be submitted to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UN WGEID). The group also discussed two new projects, namely, "A just environment for better protection from enforced disappearances to attain concrete breakthroughs for truth and justice," with the Bread for the World/Protestant Development Service, and "Gaining and reaping victories for a world without *desaparecidos*," with the OAK Foundation.

On organizational strengthening, the Council members aimed to make AFAD sustainable in terms of human and material resources to be able to respond to the long drawn struggle against enforced disappearances. It is the Federation's goal to have addressed the organizational challenges identified in the summing up results, such as for instance, security of human rights defenders especially in South Asian countries; funding limitations and the imperative of communication in between Council meetings by the end of 2018, taking into serious consideration the findings of the summing up activity.

AFAD committed to strive for a quantitative and qualitative leap in strength and performance in the four three years. The Federation would have corrected whatever imbalance there was in the performance of the different bodies within its structure, thus, making them march in step and head towards the same direction.

Moreover, the Council members hatched its most immediate plan for capacity building on effective advocacy and gender sensitivity and people were in consensus to hold the event in Thailand.

The Council meeting culminated in meetings

between the Executive Council and Bangkok-based regional organizations such as the International Federation of Human Rights, the International Commission of Jurists, and Forum Asia. These meetings intended to fortify AFAD's voice against enforced disappearances in Asia.

In the Philippines, where the AFAD Secretariat is based, the Federation, in cooperation with the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND), launched a film entitled, "*Walang Paalam*" or "No Goodbye" on March 31, 2015. The film featured three stories of enforced disappearance. One story was about two victims who surfaced alive, the other was about a victim who was found dead, and the third was about a labor lawyer who



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Council members showed solidarity to the call to surface Sombath during the Council meeting which was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 2-3 of February 2015.



AFAD Secretariat during the film screening of *Walang Paalam* on March 31, 2015 at the University of the Philippines – Diliman in Quezon City.

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Film showing of *Walang Paalam* at the Philippine Normal University (PNU)

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Film showing of *Walang Paalam* at University of the East – Manila.

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was disappeared during the Martial Law regime. He remains disappeared to this date.

The movie had been screened in several universities nationwide, in line with AFAD's campaign to turn the phenomenon of enforced disappearances from a parochial to a broader societal concern.

Shortly after the Council meeting in February, the whole organization reconvened in March 2015 to participate in a conference on enhancing capacities for effective advocacy and gender sensitivity.

The AFAD Council, Executive Council, and the AFAD Secretariat and campaign country staff members all participated in this event that bore the theme: "Enhancing capacities towards a world without *desaparecidos*."

The activity primarily served to unify what AFAD wished to achieve in the next four years in terms of institutional building, as well as in its campaign for the signing and ratification of the international Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. An integral part of this campaign is attaining concrete breakthroughs in the justice campaign by filing cases in court, winning these cases, and punishing the

perpetrators to the full extent of the law.

Taking into consideration that Asia is bereft of regional human rights mechanisms for protection, the conference underscored the use of UN mechanisms and their mandates, specifically those of the UNWGEID, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (UNCED), and the UN Special Rapporteur for the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence. While the United Nations is not the end-all and the be-all of AFAD's struggles, the support of the international community is deemed important to complement efforts at the national levels in order to bring the message across to the proper authorities.

The three-day capacity enhancement was facilitated by Atty. Cecilia Jimenez, a human rights lawyer knowledgeable on UN mechanisms. To concretize the training, campaign plans were charted by participants of every country represented, which would then serve as basis for upcoming activities geared towards the realization of AFAD's targets for 2015.

Corollary to effective advocacy is gender sensitivity. In the phenomenon of enforced disappearance, the direct victims are often men, so women and children are the ones who mostly bear

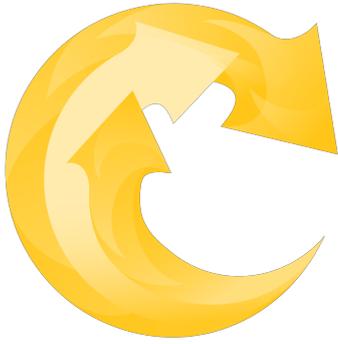
the brunt of the consequences. The effects of enforced disappearance include, among other things, emotional trauma caused by the unexpected loss and the absence of closure brought about by the uncertainty of the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared. Especially with the women, gendered impact includes economic dislocation as many of the disappeared were the breadwinners before the disappeared.

Women, whose social status is uncertain because of the very nature of enforced disappearance, are left to care for their children. This gendered impact of enforced disappearance all the more compels AFAD to incorporate gender into all its interventions. The participants deemed it imperative for AFAD's draft gender policy to be reviewed and finalized for implementation.

AFAD Council and AFAD Secretariat  
during the Enhancing Capacities  
Training in Bangkok, Thailand.

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# SECOND QUARTER:

## Intensification of regional cooperation and reaping concrete victories



(From L-R: FIND Chairperson Nilda Lagman-Sevilla, Commission on Human Rights Chairperson Atty. Chito Gascon, AFAD Secretary-General Mary Aileen Bacalso and Free Jonas Burgos Movement Chairperson Edita Burgos during the unveiling of the book “From Grief to Courage”

On 24, July 2015, AFAD launched its fifth book, “From Grief to Courage,” which is a product of an inter-regional conference on best practices on legislation on enforced disappearances held in September 2014. Beyond legislation, the book contains best practices in all aspects of intervention to combat the malady of enforced disappearances. Presentations from experts and practitioners on the issue of enforced disappearances from Asia, Latin America, and Europe are chronicled in the book that is intended to serve as guide for all those who are part of the global fight against enforced disappearances.

Responding to the sorry state of human rights situation in Laos, AFAD continued to campaign for the release of development worker Sombath Somphone. In solidarity with Sombath’s wife, Shui meng Ng, AFAD’s individual member in Laos, member-organizations conducted various activities to call for Sombath’s return.

“Where is Sombath?” This nagging question supposedly loud enough to be heard by the Lao government, unfortunately fell on deaf ears within the government that ironically signed the

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance on 29 September 2008. This occurred despite the fact that at the beginning of the 2015, during the Universal Periodic Review of the Government of Laos at the UN in Geneva, several governments called on Laos to resolve the case of Sombath and to ratify the Convention on Enforced Disappearance. During the 105<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN WGEID, AFAD submitted a General Allegation against the Lao Government for its utter failure to abide by the provisions of the 1992 United Nations Declaration for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

AFAD’s voice at the regional level was echoed during the International Week of the Disappeared when member-organizations conducted, in a synchronized manner, various forms of meaningful campaign activities. Some of the member-organizations conducted their solidarity events with Laos.

Seeds had been sown and they bore fruits. Victories were then reaped. In a manner unprecedented, HAK, AFAD member-organization

in Timor-Leste, in cooperation with member-organizations in Indonesia namely, Association of Families of the Disappeared in Indonesia (IKOHI), KontraS, and other civil society organizations, such as AJAR, facilitated the reunification of 14 disappeared Timorese children with their biological parents in Timor-Leste. These children were forcibly taken by Indonesian soldiers during the occupation of Timor-Leste and brought to Indonesia. HAK, in cooperation with AFAD, IKOHI, KontraS, and AJAR, facilitated a skills exchange in cooperation with the *Liga Guatemalteca de Higiene Mental*. Mr. Marco Antonio Garavito, Director of this Guatemalan organization, shared his expertise. At the time of writing, his group had found 416 Guatemalan children who disappeared during the Guatemalan civil war from 1969-1996 and reunited them with their biological parents.

The most humanly gratifying outcome for any organization working against enforced disappearances is to find disappeared persons alive and return them to their loved ones. This was what happened in Timor-Leste when 14 disappeared children, now adults, came together to the HAK office to meet their biological families. More than 20 years of separation resulted in a very touching reunion. As Mr. Garavito said, the hearts of these families were torn apart and separated from each other for several years. It is extremely important for the separated parts of the hearts to be reunited. The reunification entails a process, which is very personal, but necessitates the accompaniment of organizations working on the issue. The event emphasized the importance of the sustainability and growth of the relationships, which



Aisah reunites with her mother in Viqueque on 19th May 2015. She and her two brothers at that time were 5, 7 and 8 years old. They were taken to Indonesia in 1994. They were separated for 21 years.

for a long time, were destroyed by this cruel phenomenon.



Marco Garavito explains how the process of reunification is also about reunifying separated parts of the heart.



# THIRD QUARTER:

## Attaining a political environment that respects the right not to be disappeared

As AFAD entered the second half of the year, it intensified its campaign and lobby efforts for the respect of the right not to be subjected to enforced disappearance.

In Seoul, South Korea, the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights organized a conference on enforced disappearances held on July 30, 2015. Invited to speak during the conference were Sombath's wife, Shui meng Ng, Sisto dos Santos of HAK Timor-Leste, and Yati Andriyani of KontraS-Indonesia. The AFAD Secretary-General acted as conference moderator and members of the diplomatic community, representatives of the UN office in Seoul, various non-government organizations (NGOs), and families of the disappeared participated in the event. Mr. Garavito once again shared his group's success stories in finding disappeared children in Guatemala.

The full day conference was followed by a series of lobbying meetings with the Ministry of Reunification and the National Commission on Human Rights. Both of these offices promised to recommend to the Korean government the signing and ratification of the Convention on Enforced Disappearance.

As the Federation carried out lobbying activities in different countries, AFAD gave priority to Indonesia, whose new President, Joko Widodo, was catapulted to power with the earnest support of the civil society.

An AFAD delegation, composed of the AFAD Chairperson, the AFAD Secretary-General, Shui meng Ng and representatives from the AFAD Secretariat, KontraS, and IKOHI knocked on doors of government offices in Indonesia to call for the resolution of past cases of enforced disappearance



(From L-R: Mary Aileen Bacalso of AFAD, Sisto dos Santos of HAK Timor-Leste, and Shui meng Ng, wife of Sombath during a panel discussion in the NKHR organized conference in South Korea)



(AFAD's meeting with representatives of the National Commission on Human Rights in Indonesia.)

(In photo: Former Magsaysay Awardee Seng Raw Laphai and Jon Ungphakorn, AFAD Secretary-General Mary Aileen Bacalso, Sombath's wife Shui Meng Ng and FJBM Chairperson Ms. Edita Burgos raising the symbol of universal ratification of the Convention against enforced disappearances)



and for the fulfillment of the promise to sign and ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Offices visited included the National Commission on Human Rights, Ministry of Law and Human Rights, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Human Rights. In solidarity with Indonesian and Papuan human rights defenders, the AFAD delegation joined the weekly Thursday rally in front of the Presidential Palace to call on the new government to fulfill its promises to the very people responsible for its ascent to power. There is no better time than now for Indonesia to seize this moment to serve as an example for the rest of the ASEAN countries in championing human rights by resolving past cases of human rights violations.



In photo: Adilur Rahman Khan, A S M Nasiruddin, and Sazzad Hussain of Bangladesh-based Odhikar in a partnership project with the Asian Legal Resource Center (ALRC.)

On 30 August, the International Day of the Disappeared, AFAD member-organizations paid tribute to all the *desaparecidos* of the world. In the Philippines, where Sombath Somphone received the Ramon Magsaysay Award, AFAD organized a forum that honored the disappeared development worker. Shui meng Ng and former Magsaysay awardees, Seng Raw Laphai and Jon Ungphakorn graced the event. University of the Philippines Chancellor, Dr. Michael Tan, welcomed the audience and stressed the importance of putting a stop to enforced disappearances. The president of the Free Jonas Burgos Movement, Mrs. Edita Burgos, spoke of parallelisms between the case of Sombath and her disappeared son, Jonas. Mrs. Burgos considered Jonas and Sombath as brothers—as both loved farming and were disappeared. The rest of the AFAD member-organizations honored the disappeared in many different ways.



(A protest was conducted by Odhikar during the International Day of the Disappeared.)



In photo: DHR Chairperson Amina Masood Janjua in a Press Conference organized by DHR in the National Press Club, 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2015)



Janak Raut addresses the mass meeting of families of victims on Justice Day)



(CVSJ and Advocacy Forum in the Umbrella Rally held on International Justice Day)



(Launching of Structures of Violence by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Kashmir)

Unlike in countries such as the Philippines, where democratic space is present, in Bangladesh, families of the disappeared were blocked by the government from using the National Press Club as the supposed venue chosen to commemorate the International Day of the Disappeared. Less than 24 hours prior to the joint commemoration of the International Day of the Disappeared by AFAD, Asian Legal Resource Center, International Federation for Human Rights and Odhikar, the National Press Club cancelled the event. The families found a new place to stage their activity, but the blocking incident at the first venue subjected them once more to a traumatic experience. Many of their cases are still recent and fresh. What occurred was only a part of the systematic persecution of human rights defenders and victims of human rights violations. Amidst all these, Odhikar never fails to strengthen its human rights defenders at the grassroots level who take charge of documenting cases of human rights violations which are chronicled in its periodic human rights report. With its several international recognitions achieved in 2014, which serve as a kind of protection, Odhikar consistently links with international organizations because domestic remedies are either futile or non-existent.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is marred by never-ending cases of enforced disappearances. The DHR has been up to its neck in filing First Instance Reports of disappearances; submitting cases to the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, organizing huge rallies for families of the disappeared, commemorating traditional events, and consistently conducting solidarity events for Sombath. These activities all the more caught the ire of the perpetrators who continue to commit new cases that necessitate urgent actions.

In Nepal, a country devastated by earthquakes this year, the Advocacy Forum and the Conflict Victims Society for Justice (CVSJ) provided relief support to victims, including psychosocial support. Simultaneously, both organizations, in cooperation with civil society organizations, never failed to continue the campaign against enforced disappearance and demanded a review on the verdict on transitional justice mechanisms. The two organizations also called for the amendment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission and Disappearances. The pursuit of truth and justice is an uphill climb and these AFAD member-organizations strived to conduct national and international activities, taking advantage of the Nepal upcoming Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations in November 2015.

In the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) published a book entitled, "Structures of Violence." The publication reported the wanton transgression of human rights by security forces

who pledged to protect their fellow citizens. Heavily militarized, Kashmir has the highest number of security forces in the world. APDP's earlier publications, "Buried Evidence" and "Facts Underground," speak about the phenomenon of mass graves in this lost paradise.



## Treading the path of international work

Simultaneous with the Federation's work at the national level, AFAD Chairperson, Secretary-General, and representatives of member-organizations from Indonesia and Nepal knocked on doors of the United Nations during the 30<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council. While trying to exhaust domestic remedies, AFAD also accessed whatever instruments were available in the international arena.

Human rights defenders, especially in South Asian countries, are constantly at risk of being persecuted. In light of this, AFAD met with the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Mr. Michel Forst, and presented the case of human rights defenders in Bangladesh, including the government's blocking of the venue initially intended for the commemoration of the International Day of the Disappeared.

Additionally, AFAD raised its concern over Ms. Masood not being granted a visa to Switzerland and the continued refusal of the Indian government to renew the passport of APDP Patron, Mr. Parvez Imroz. Munir's assassination was also mentioned in view of the release of the pilot Polycarpus who was sentenced for 14 years, but served for only 8 years. Mr. Forst noted these concerns and committed to act on them.

In a meeting with the UN WGEID, the AFAD delegation updated the group of its work and followed up the cases and general allegations submitted. Not one of the general allegations was acknowledged, however, the cases submitted have yet to be answered. But each submission from AFAD signifies precious lives, which could be saved through the intervention of the

UNWGEID. The AFAD delegation concluded in its evaluation that, in view of the limitations of the UNWGEID, it is important to follow up the cases and to explore other international mechanisms.

The AFAD delegation also met with UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (UN CED). Even if it is not possible for governments of countries where AFAD member-organizations are based to work with the UNCED, since they have not ratified the Convention on Enforced Disappearances, AFAD still coordinated with the committee for possible joint efforts in campaigning for as many ratifications as possible, especially in Asian countries. Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan of the Non-Violence International, a member of the International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED), presented the project, "Disappearance Monitor," which is a global research on all UN member states' compliance or non-compliance with the provisions in the Convention, regardless of whether or not they are states parties. With an estimated 99.99% accuracy, the Disappearance Monitor is a kind of research that questions governments and which governments in turn cannot question. If implemented, the Disappearance Monitor project will go a long way towards universal ratification and implementation of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

Notably, AFAD conducted a successful side event, in cooperation with the Non-Violence International and the ICAED. Around 60 people from NGOs and states representatives participated in the event, focused on enforced disappearances in Asia and the importance of the universal ratification and implementation of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances. His

Excellency Ambassador Alberto Pedro D' Alotto of the Permanent Mission of Argentina to United Nations in Geneva graced the occasion. He stressed: "The Convention on Enforced Disappearances reinforces the rights of victims and their families and establishes mechanisms to make the obligations effective in this regard, especially on the right to truth, justice, and reparation." It was an honor to also have Mrs. Stella de Carlotto, President of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, present in the event. The AFAD Secretary-General made a special mention of the struggle of the mothers and grandmothers in Argentina.

AFAD, being the focal point of the ICAED, took it as an opportunity to convene members of the coalition present in Geneva, as well as the Geneva-based member-organizations who were available for the meeting. The reinvigoration of the ICAED Steering Committee, given that it already has 55 member-organizations from various parts of the world, was deemed necessary. The six member-organizations present decided to recruit fresh members to the Steering Committee when some existing members raised concerns over their limitations to carry out their responsibilities.

To maximize AFAD's presence in Europe, the AFAD Secretary-General took time to make a quick visit to London, United Kingdom to meet with its partner, the Open Society Foundation, while its Chairperson Khurram Parvez visited Brussels, Belgium to explore partnership possibilities with the European Union. It is hoped that the visits would facilitate generation of resources needed to sustain the work of the Federation.



(AFAD and Nonviolence International's Side Event on the Imperative of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances on September 17, 2015)

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# The Year-End

During the last quarter of the year, the AFAD Secretariat visited Sri Lanka. This country holds a notorious record of enforced disappearances and many other human rights violations. It was recently visited by the UN WGEID. From the capital city of Colombo to the eastern and northern parts of the country, the AFAD delegation, in cooperation with the Families of the Disappeared, toured the whole country to meet families of the disappeared, whose wounds are still fresh from the ravages of war that resulted in the disappearance of their children. Grieving women turned to the AFAD delegates, showing pictures of their loved ones and sharing every bit of document they hold on to as proof of disappearances. Some lost more than one member of the family. Many shed tears as they related their futile search for answers. They refused charity and demanded the truth. They wanted their disappeared children to be returned alive.

AFAD's visit was followed by lobbying activities with various government ministries. The delegation met with

the Speaker of the Parliament and three ministers and pushed for a dialogue between the new government and the victims. It also encouraged the government to immediately fulfill the promise to ratify the Convention on Enforced Disappearances and be the first South Asian country to have a law against enforced disappearances. In so doing, Sri Lanka would be a good example to Asia in dealing with the past and facing the future with conviction that human rights violations should never be repeated. And indeed, on 10 December 2012, as one important step, Sri Lanka has made itself the 95th signatory to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

In the Philippines, intensive and extensive showing of films, "Walang Paalam," and "Burgos," were conducted. Within the year, AFAD had reached more than 2,000 students from major regions of the country. These activities stressed the importance of reaching out to young people and mobilizing more allies in the fight



(Families of the disappeared in Sri Lanka during the visit of the AFAD Team composed of Secretary-General Ms. Mary Aileen Bacalso, FOD Chairperson Mr. Brito Fernando, FJBM Chairperson Ms. Edita Burgos and AFAD Regional Research and Documentation Officer, Ivanka Custodio)



(AFAD Council members, representatives of organizations, and Secretariat members participated in a commemoration activity in the Bantayog ng mga Bayani, Quezon City, Philippines)



(Film Showing of "Burgos", the film about the disappearances of Jonas Burgos, in Bicol, Philippines)

against enforced disappearances. The Burgos film was also shown in several European countries, telling the world of the determined struggle of a mother searching for the evasive truth and justice for her disappeared son.

In the final months of the year, members of the Federation convened on 30 November to 2 December for a training conducted in Manila, Philippines entitled, "Breakthrough in leadership and strategy," which was supported by Bridge Management Training. A total of 41 people participated and the group was comprised of members of the AFAD Council, AFAD Secretariat, country campaign and documentation staff members of AFAD, including representatives of FIND. The training was made distinct from other leadership training courses by the use of meaningful exercises that addressed the needs of the organizations, as well as the individual members.

After the training, the AFAD Council met to assess the Federation's accomplishments for the year, reviewed the situation in different countries where AFAD is based and drafted general plans for the year, taking into consideration the bright ideas proposed during the leadership training. The meeting included a poignant monologue called, "Mrs. B," which narrated the life and struggle of Mrs. Edita Burgos. A moment of silence was then observed for Sombath Somphone, whose third anniversary of enforced disappearance was then to be commemorated on 15 December 2015.

Members of the AFAD Secretariat visited Nepal on 7 to 14 December 2015 to network with the human rights organizations based there and to reconnect with the families of the disappeared. Documentation practices and challenges were shared, together with its member-organizations, CVSJ and Advocacy Forum. Nepal-based legal organization, TRIAL, also joined the

meeting to share their experience in using documentation to file cases of disappearances with the UN Human Rights Committee. AFAD also participated in the commemoration of Human Rights Day on 10 December, as well as in the 9th Annual Human Rights Magna-Meet and two other mobilizations.

Meanwhile, the AFAD Secretariat in the Philippines, in cooperation with FIND, conducted a poster-making contest among the youth to raise awareness on the issue of enforced disappearance. A total of 19 people aged between 18 and 30 participated. Family members of the disappeared from the National Capital Region and from Mindanao were invited to the event to deliver testimonies and inspire the young artists. The competition awarded the three top artists with cash prizes and plaques of recognition. The families of the victims and the AFAD Secretariat also gave two other contestants special prizes.

On 14 December, the AFAD Secretary-General participated in an international conference on Torture and Enforced Disappearances in Asia held in Jakarta, Indonesia. Along with representatives of AFAD member-organizations in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Shui meng Ng from Laos, the Secretary-General spoke about disappearances in their respective countries on the eve of the 3rd anniversary of the disappearance of Sombath Somphone.

Finally, the AFAD Secretariat in the Philippines commemorated on 16 December the 3rd anniversary of Sombath Somphone and launched its website on the campaign against enforced disappearances in the Philippines. The activity was highlighted with a video message from Shui meng Ng, who indefatigably continues to search for Sombath and uses all avenues to find the truth about her disappeared husband.

The AFAD Secretariat's fruitful 2015 culminated in a well-deserved Christmas party on 18 December.



(In photo: CVSJ's Janak Raut, AFAD's Legal Intern, Sara La Rocca, and AFAD Regional Research and Documentation Officer, Ivanka Custodio during the commemoration of Human Rights Day on December 10)



(In photo: AFAD Secretary-General Ms. Mary Aileen Bacalso with the winners of the poster-making contest)



# A step closer to its vision: gaining the desired outcomes

At the national, regional and international levels, amidst the situation of repression in South Asian countries on one hand and the semblance of democracy in Southeast Asian countries on the other, the Federation has made itself more visible before its own constituents, the general public, the governments and the international community. In the conduct of its activities, aware of the imperative of internal strengthening and consolidation, the Federation has not forgotten that has to unceasingly enhance whatever capacity it has built during the almost two decades of its life as a Federation.

The strength of any Federation is as good as the strength of its member-organizations. Thus, efforts of the member-organization to consolidate and reach out to other victims of enforced disappearances are themselves strengthening the Federation's base and thus, in no small measure, contributing to what the AFAD has to further achieve as it makes every step of the way towards the seemingly impossible dream of attaining a world without disappeared persons.

The projection of the national phenomenon of enforced disappearances in each of the countries where the Federation has a presence through the collective activities of families of the disappeared in each organization in cooperation with civil society, has contributed in many different ways... The memorialization activities both serve as a tribute to the disappeared and as a message that enforced disappearance has caused irreparable damage to society. Every effort towards the truth brings AFAD closer to its much-cherished dream for a world without desaparecidos. Every small victory towards justice delivers a message of the imperative for non-repetition.

Owning hard-earned outcomes are necessary in order to bolster organizational confidence. Thus, in 2015, AFAD has contributed to some well-deserved outcomes. Significant of which is the reunification of disappeared children in Timor-Leste with their biological parents. Resources from OAK Foundation in no small measure, helped realize the results of the efforts principally by the national organizations from Timor-Leste and Indonesia in order to attain this humanly gratifying achievement .

The international community is looking to Sri Lanka as it has started to look back upon its dark history that continues to haunt its present. Sri Lanka's signing the Convention on Enforced Disappearance, albeit partial, is a sweet victory in a country ravaged by the ruins of its internal conflicts that occurred at different periods of its history. Much remains to be done towards finding the disappeared and bringing them back to their families. The treaty's ratification and implementation should soon follow Sri Lanka's recent signing.

In the Philippines, which is the base country of the AFAD Secretariat, the continuing partnership with FIND, in many information-dissemination activities all throughout the year is an important component in educating people of this harsh reality of enforced disappearances. FIND's strong documentation and nationwide membership to a large measure gives life to AFAD's presence in its country of base.

The Free Jonas Burgos Movement, through the case of Jonas Burgos, delivers a strong message that enforced disappearance is not a phenomenon of the past – it continues in recent years amidst the calloused indifference of the Aquino administration, which has miserably failed to resolve a case which the Supreme Court has already considered a crime of enforced disappearance based on the Anti Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act of 2012.

And the struggle continues....



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