

The Power of Memory...

by Rosanna S. Contreras

A Reflection

The *Panti Waluyo Sejati*, a two storey house with three big rooms that stands at the heart of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, has been a home for about twenty elderly people, mostly women and mothers whose ages range from sixty-six to eighty-four. The dwellers of this house are no ordinary senior citizens but survivors of what is considered to be one of the most horrifying crimes against humanity of the 20th century, Indonesia's 1965 Massacre.

The 1965 Massacre is a political slaughter that killed hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Indonesian people. Innumerable people were kidnapped and never seen again (disappeared), arrested, jailed without due process, tortured, raped, robbed of their pieces of property and discriminated against. All these cruelties happened because of the victims' alleged participation in the 30 September 1965 failed coup attempt, an allegation that boiled down to the victims' suspected affiliation with the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* or the *PKI* (Communist Party of Indonesia). The victims who survived the massacre were stigmatized by their

communities, not allowed to vote or even engage in any civic and social activities. Worse still, they are ostracized and deprived of the rights normally enjoyed by ordinary citizens. These series of violence and gross desecration of human rights were committed in just a year.

Forty-Five Years on and Still Counting....

After all these decades, one would have thought that the survivors would have received some form of compensation for the sufferings that they have endured. Sadly, the truth is, to date, nothing has been done about this issue. The rule of law does not work in Indonesia. Despite numerous domestic and international treaties and other instruments which the Indonesian government signed and ratified, there are still no fair legal remedies for the 1965 victims. Had the succeeding Indonesian leaders the political will to effectively address the issue, these treaties and laws could have very well provided comprehensive reparation including restitution, compensation and rehabilitation of the 1965 victims.,

All of the succeeding leaders, who assumed power after the leadership of the New Order, promised to bring about justice to the 1965 victims, but not one of them kept the promise. The whole truth about the occurrence of the 1965 massacre has not yet been revealed and the perpetrators have not yet been brought to justice. At present, no provision to significantly alleviate their miserable life has been extended to the 1965 victims. Those who are alive still bear the brunt of discrimination. Basic rehabilitation and compensation, or at least restoration of their good name and reputation has never been served.

Safe Haven

During the AFAD's Asia Lobby Tour in Jakarta, Indonesia on 17-20 November 2009¹, I was



The 1965 mothers are the living testimony to one of the world's acts of inhumanity.



An expression of solidarity: The AFAD lobby team poses for a picture with the 1965 Mothers.

privileged to personally meet the victims of the 1965 Massacre who are staying in *Panti*. As it appeared, I thought that this place was just an ordinary 'home for the aged.' I realized later that this is a special place. This house is a sanctuary for the 1965 victims where they live secured, free from any prejudice and comfortable with each other's company. This is a safe haven where they share the same dark shadow of the past, their common aspiration and conviction to bring about justice not just for the 1965 victims but to every Indonesian whose rights have been trampled upon. I admire them that at their age, they are active and steadfast to let younger people like us become aware of their horrible experience so that this will not happen again and for us to continue to become vanguards of human rights and justice.

In the sharing, I heard one of them say, "You can cut the grass off but it will keep on growing unless you cut it from its roots." Another one reiterated "they can kill us but not our ideologies - these keep our spirit up. We will keep on telling our stories to as many people as possible so that they won't forget the horrors of our life." Indeed, I cheered for their fearless principle, "Let us toss to that." The perpetrators might have thought that their transgression had restrained the struggle of the Indonesian people. They were absolutely wrong. The clamor for justice will persist for as long as the memory of injustice is told and retold. The case of the 1965 victims is a living proof of the liberating power of memory. While human bodies can be killed or 'enforced-ly' disappeared, memory should never ever be obliterated.

Every Thursday at four o'clock in the afternoon, inspired by the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* of Argentina, the 1965 victims join hands with several other mothers of

the disappeared and with many human rights advocates in front of the Presidential Palace to shout and seek for justice.

An Enduring Saga

As the meeting went on, these courageous elderly women and men introduced themselves and told us brief but heart-rending stories of their past. *Ibu* Tin is the youngest at the age of sixty-six and Grandma Fuji, as she was fondly called, is the oldest at eighty-four. The common denominator of their individual stories is that all of them were suspected of being members of the *PKI*, arrested, tortured, robbed of their belongings, deprived from the company of their loved ones, and imprisoned for ages. The military men attacked their communities and started to shoot in all directions. Those who survived and captured were detained without any fair trial. Prison became their abode for more than a decade. While in jail, they were forced to provide not just for their own needs but also for the military officers who were the culprits of their untold miseries. Supapti Isnanto, eighty years old, recalled that it was her husband who served the longest year (thirty-three years) in prison. Her husband was displayed and about to be executed before the public. But fate changed. He was fortunately released, instead. Two years later, he died of old age.

The story that struck me most was that of *Ibu* Lestari, a mother of five children. She was imprisoned for fourteen years and 4 months. Her husband was also detained, tried and sentenced to death. She had never known the whereabouts of her children since she lost them during the military operation in their place in East Java. Information that reached her disclosed that her



Years of injustice and suffering have never deminished the 1965 Mothers' hope for truth and justice.

daughter, together with two others, were captured, tied, and thrown into the river. Determined, when released from prison, she tirelessly looked for her other children. Fortunate enough, she was able to find her youngest child, now thirty-seven years old and a teacher. However, the 'child' she ardently yearned to embrace and to live with for the rest of her life refused to be with her for fear of being tagged as a communist or an outcast like her mother.

As I listened, I silently empathized with them and imagined myself in their situation. I could not help but murmur a little prayer: "My Lord, please uphold them, keep them, strengthen them and continue to uplift their spirits. Please embrace them for me."

Sounds Familiar?

All of a sudden, a lucid parallelism occurred in my mind while listening to their stories. I started to remember my own mother's painful account of her past during the Japanese occupation in the Philippines in 1940, when she was about 8 years old. She shared this to me a very long time ago. Her story had already slipped off my memory. Had I not been given the chance to face-to-face meet and to hear the life of the 1965 victims who are themselves mothers, I could not have been led back to this poignant memory of a distant past.

My mother informed me how frightening the situation was during that time - the difficult life and the horror of being noticed and branded by the Japanese military and the *Makapili*² as a guerilla.³ Women were forced to be their wives and/or were raped. Because my *lolo*⁴ was a trader, he would take the whole family along with him in his business trips so that he needed not worry about them. One day, when they went back to their own house, a 'zoning'⁵ was declared and did happen in their place. Armed men started to search houses and demanded that all men go out and assemble to the plaza. Those who complained and disobeyed the order would be killed right there in their homes. My *lolo* was already sleeping then but because of fear, my *lola*⁶ asked him to go and he obeyed. From then on, he was never able to come back home. News from the neighborhood revealed that he was among those who were pinpointed by the *Makapili* as a guerilla and among those who were killed and buried somewhere in an unknown grave. Life became more difficult for my mother's family. They lost not just their breadwinner, but also the source of their strength.

My mother was left to the care of her elder sister as my *lola* forced herself to carry on with life and started to look for means to provide for their needs. Her siblings were not able to go to school. She grew up wondering where her father had been and feared about what was in store for her in the future. I cannot imagine how an 8-year old child could bear the pain of losing a very loving father



... and hopefully, they shall cry no more!

and at the same time worry about her future. I cannot not help but imagine what would life be had we grown up with my *lolo* around. What difference would it make to my mother's life and mine had we both experienced his support, cuddles and love? Perhaps, we could have become better persons, enriched by his love and inspired by his sweet memories.

At this point, I realized that the 1965 victims are, in a way, also my grandmothers. Their lives, their sufferings, their resolute aspirations and convictions are like those of my *lola's*.

Beyond *Panti*

On 20 November, the AFAD's Lobby Team proceeded to Bali on our way to Timor Leste, the second leg of the tour. It was, for me, a providential circumstance to meet a group of young men and women who are mostly grandchildren of the 1965 victims. They dream of a just and peaceful Indonesia. They regularly meet in a small plaza where they seemed to have forgotten, but not, the pain of losing their dear grandparents as they recollect memories of the past, study, sing, and share life together. I could identify with them. I saw myself in them. As I reckoned, I felt that they also suffer the consequence of that gap in life which I and my mother had with my *lolo*. I know that in our hearts, the memory of our grandparents will always remain.

Milan Kundera once said, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Let us not forget. The stories told by the mothers of 1965 victims and my own mother must be put on record. It should never be lost and disregarded. This is a universal story, not just in Indonesia and the Philippines. It also happened in Timor Leste, in Thailand and in every part of the world. If in their lifetime, our mothers may not achieve what they have dreamt of and fought for, the younger generation will pursue and realize it, not only for their mothers and their present generation but also for the next.

In Solidarity

I appreciate the AFAD's initiative to have the members of the Secretariat join the Asian Lobby Tour. Not only did it make me grounded to my realities and that of the *desaparecidos*, it also served as a relevant training for me. Lobbying is an effective way of directly giving information to the government people on the extent of enforced disappearances and the imperative of the Convention's immediate entry into force.⁷ Aside from doing finance work, lobby work is a venue for me to do

something concrete for the *desaparecidos*, as well as for my *lolo* and my mother. I would like to be in solidarity with all the victims in the struggle for truth and justice, for in solidarity, we shall overcome.

1 The AFAD Asia Lobby Tour: Campaign and lobbying is AFAD's core tasks. In view of the eventual entry of the Convention into force in the immediate future, the AFAD conducted a series of lobbying activities called the Asia Lobby Tour, to help convince the Asian governments where AFAD's member-organizations are based, to sign and ratify the Convention. The first tour started in September 2009 in Indonesia. The team was composed of the AFAD's Chairperson Mugiyanto, Treasurer Mandira Sharma, Secretary-General Mary Aileen D. Bacalso, and Ms Ruth Llanos, a representative from the *Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos* or the FEDEFAM.

On 17 November 2009, I was lucky to have joined the second round of the Tour which was composed of Mugiyanto, Mary Aileen Bacalso, Ruth Llanos, and Khurram Parvez, AFAD Council member and a representative of Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP-Kashmir). The team went to Jakarta to follow up on the recommendations of the Indonesian Parliament Committee Inquiring into the Case of the 1997-1998 disappeared activists and which had been submitted to President Yudhoyono. Unfortunately, since the President is faced with a serious issue of corruption known as the Bail-out Scandal involving an amount of 7 million dollars, the recommendations remain unimplemented.

The team proceeded to Timor Leste in November 20, where innumerable victims of human rights violations, including enforced disappearances during the East Timorese' struggle for independence, continue to cry for truth and justice. The *Percumpulan HAK*, the ninth and newest member of the AFAD, facilitated the lobby tour. The group was able to meet with President Luis Ramos-Horta and within a thirty-minute discussion, the team was able to get his commitment to sign and ratify the Convention soonest.

The last leg of the tour was in Thailand from the 26th day of November up to the 29th. The team also had meetings with the Ministry of Justice and with the National Human Rights Commission headed by Chairperson Professor Amana Pongsapich respectively. We were with the Working Group on Justice for Peace, AFAD's member organization in Thailand and three victims who submitted their individual cases to the Commission.

2 *Makapili* is a Filipino word for local informants whose service was used by the Japanese government to suppress the uprising of the Filipino people during their occupation of the Philippines.

3 *Guerilla* is a Filipino word for a member of the *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan*, the Filipino people's army who fought for independence from Japanese invasion.

4 *Lolo* is a Filipino word for grandfather

5 'Zoning' is a community inspection regularly done by Japanese military together with the *Makapili* to monitor and curb *guerilla* activities.

6 *Lola* is a Filipino term for grandmother.

7 The United Nations Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance is "a treaty of universal scope, which will be legally binding for the States that ratify it. Its text was approved by the former UN Commission on Human Rights on 23 September 2005; was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on 27 June 2006; approved by the UN General Assembly on 20 December 2006 in New York, USA. As of this writing, 18 states have already ratified the Convention. Two more ratifications are needed for it to enter into force.



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