

Hostages in Their Own Country

Contributed by Alan Davis
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James Balao disappeared exactly three months ago today on September 17 as he was heading home to his family. Jonas Burgos was abducted from the middle of a Quezon shopping mall 19 months ago, and University of the Philippines students Sherlyn Cadapan and Karen Empeño vanished two and a half years ago.

With the 'anniversary' of Balao's disappearance coming up I was both stirred and angered after visiting the website of Arkibong Bayan. Stirred -- because so many people have become involved to demand his release. Angered -- because that all the petitions and campaigns and investigations and demands for his 'surfacing' have so far come to naught.

The website is full of pictures of candlelight vigils for James and they reminded me of the candles lit years ago at St. Brides Church in London's Fleet Street for journalists like John McCarthy and Terry Anderson who disappeared in Lebanon in the mid 80s. They reminded me too of the candles lit by relatives of the American diplomats held in Tehran during the Iranian revolution and the storming of the US Embassy.

Of course McCarthy, Anderson and the US diplomats were all hostages. They were kidnapped and held in foreign countries – many of them were physically and mentally tortured and some of them died.

And the difference between them and the likes of Balao, Burgos, Cadapan and Empeño is….

...is what exactly?

Is there in fact any difference – or should we start calling 'a spade a spade' and all be referring to Balao, Burgos, Cadapan, Empeño and others as hostages? If not, why not?

Imagine for a moment what it must be like for them? In Tehran at least the US diplomats knew that securing their release was the top priority of the Carter Administration. The recent book, *Guests of the Ayatollah* goes into painstaking and minute detail about all the meetings, negotiations and strategy discussions. A daring military rescue was even attempted and cost the lives of dozens of US soldiers.

In the United States the hostages were remembered daily by hundreds of thousands of yellow ribbons; by countless school projects; by countless demonstrations and by a concerted media and lobbying campaign that never let the administration forget what its number one priority was.

And it is widely agreed that the hostage crisis cost President Carter the 1980 election.

Contrast this to what is happening in the Philippines and imagine what it must feel like to know you are being held hostage on your own country – and most probably by people who have sworn to protect and serve.

The diplomats, John McCarthy, Terry Anderson and others eventually went home to 'hero's' welcomes. Imagine if the state doing the kidnapping is your very own? How that must feel? And what does that tell us?

Lest we forget, members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines are also being held hostage – and one person's wrong doesn't make another person right. Because abducting James Balao is wrong, it doesn't follow that the New People's Army's abduction of Lieutenant Vicente Cammayo is justified. You can't build a fairer society with illegal and inhumane acts.

So let us start righting all these wrongs by recognizing the proverbial elephant in the room and call it for what it is.

The Philippines has an ongoing hostage situation and the government has to act.

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