

Celebrating Human Rights through

Poetry and Music

by Darwin B. Mendiola

The Awakening of Humanity

Human Rights Day is celebrated yearly across the world on the 10 of December, which marks the anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Awakened from the nightmares of war, the community of nations put their act together and stood united in proclaiming the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and on the moral obligations of states to protect these rights. The 2009 Human Rights Day celebration was focused on the concept of non-discrimination, a theme central to the concept of human rights and explicitly stipulated in Article 1 of the Declaration that says, "ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE BORN FREE EQUAL IN DIGNITY AND RIGHT."

Sixty-one years since the adoption of the Declaration, human rights violations are still rampant today. Millions of people all over the world continue to suffer from the curtailment of their basic right to life and liberty. For the majority of peoples in Asia in particular, human rights remain an empty promise, an elusive dream.

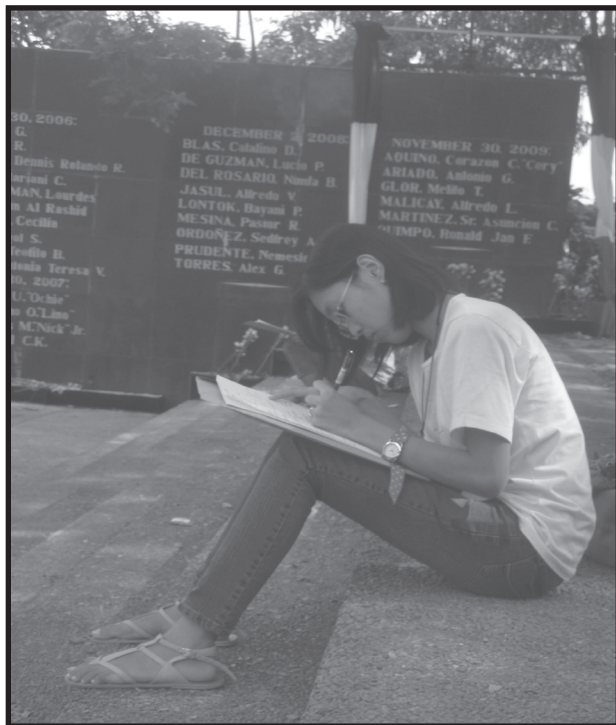
Asia, the world's biggest and most populated continent, earns the negative reputation as the most dangerous place to live in because of its notorious human rights record. In many Asian countries, human rights are not only blatantly ignored but are under severe contempt wherein political repression reigns under a climate of impunity. Everyday, countless transgressions of human rights occur while the vast majority of their abusers go unpunished and future violations are not remote possibilities. Concretely, Asia

is the continent which submitted the highest number of enforced disappearance cases to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (UNWGEID) in recent years. For one, the Philippines is one of the countries with outstanding cases of enforced disappearances, a situation which had, in 2007, urged the UNWGEID to request from the Philippine government for an invitation for a visit to the country after its first visit in 1990. Such a request remains unanswered up to this day.

The very reason why six decades ago, the Declaration was crafted and adopted by the community of nations was to assert, promote and protect the rights of every human being. This reason still remains relevant, making it imperative for us to celebrate the Human Rights Day. Celebrating this day strongly reminds us that the struggle to make human rights a reality is not yet over. Everyone has the obligation to act in order to attain the full realization of human rights for all.

Speaking the Unspeakable

The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), a regional federation of human rights organizations working directly on the issue of enforced or involuntary disappearances, joined the rest of the world in commemorating the Human Rights Day



Third prize winner, Jan Joy Louise Crismo writes her piece.

by conducting the On-The-Spot Poetry Writing and Reading Contests entitled, **“Celebrating Human Rights through Poetry and Music.”** The AFAD believes that art is a universal language that connects humanity across time and space and can be used to serve as a voice of justice, peace and equality throughout the recent history. Through this activity, it aimed to educate especially the young people about the gravity of the crime and the urgency to combat this global phenomenon through a global response. The contest also served as a venue to springboard the direct and active participation of the youth in the AFAD’s human rights work by speaking, through poetry, the unspeakable situation of the Asian *desaparecidos* and their families.

Enforced disappearance, though considered as one of the cruelest forms of human rights violations, is not getting the public attention that it deserves. The AFAD, through its secretariat and its 9 member-organizations in 7 Asian countries, has been working incessantly for more than a decade to bring the issue of enforced disappearance in the international and national spotlight. Little is known that across the Asian region, thousands of people are made to disappear and their fate and whereabouts remain

uncertain while many cases of disappearances are still being reported daily. The depth of the sufferings of the victims and their family members is unfathomable. The *desaparecidos* are cut off from the rest of the world, placed outside the protection of the law and are often tortured or killed, but their remains are not returned. Many are never seen or heard of again. While their families are left with the uncertainty of searching and longing for the return of their disappeared loved ones, their struggle for justice is almost a futile exercise in a situation where there is an absence of legal mechanisms which consequently could have filled in the gap that prevents those responsible from being brought to justice.

It is in this context that the AFAD explored the use of the artistic and literary genres such as poetry and music as powerful tools to point out these societal ills; to call the public attention to act on what is happening and to awaken them on the need for a genuine social change.

Poetry, though, maybe considered by some as a drab and a mere abstract literary endeavor reserved and enjoyed only by a few eccentrics. But for human rights communities worldwide, poetry like any other literary genres has become a medium of advocacy. Poetry as an artistic form of expression conveys a message that ordinary people can relate to. There is no right or wrong way to write a poem. No one can tell someone what and how they are supposed to write about their feelings and views of reality because in poetry, one can express what is within him or her. Poetry appeals to one’s sanity and moral sensitivity to evoke the unspoken and serves as a voice of the universal conscience. It has the power to reflect the innermost sentiments of the



The contestants and the AFAD Secretariat pose for a group picture.

heart and the soul. Human rights in poetry are usually based on horrifying conditions. But poetry also serves to demonstrate the creativity and resilience of the human spirit. While depicting grief and pain, poetry can also bring with it the freshness of hope in the face of the oppression, injustice and cruelty.

Poetry is also a therapeutic instrument to express intense emotions caused by the traumatic experiences particularly of those who have suffered directly or indirectly from human rights violations. It can be an effective coping mechanism through an internalization of a tragic event and transcending from its devastating effects. Poetry penetrates the deepest recesses of one's being, thus could serve as an effective tool to generate support for human rights advocacy.

Vying for Honor, Joining the Cause

The poetry writing contest was held on 4 December 2009 at the **Bantayog ng mga Bayani** (Heroes' Monument) in Quezon City, Philippines. It was organized by the AFAD Secretariat which is based in Manila. This activity was part of the annual commemorative activity of the federation that was done simultaneous with the activities in the other member-organizations from six other Asian countries and was done in the context of the continuing campaign for the entry into force and eventual implementation of the UN Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Earlier on the same day, at the Executive Lounge of Quezon City Hall, a roundtable discussion on enforced disappearance was organized by the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND) in cooperation with the AFAD, the Office of Councilor Janet M. Malaya, Chairperson of the Committee on Justice and Human Rights of the Quezon City Council.

The poetry writing and reading contests were open to young Filipinos who can write short poems in Filipino or English based on a given theme. Ten young men and women coming from different universities in Metro Manila eagerly participated. Three of them are family members of *desaparecidos*. The writing contest was divided into two parts. The morning session was spent in showing documentary films which provided the contestants with the valuable information on the issue. The actual writing contest was done in the afternoon.

Although the contestants were there primarily to vie for the honor and to win the prizes at stake, amounting to Php 7,000, Php 5,000, and Php 3,000 for the first prize, second prize and third prize respectively, it was made clear to them that the contest was more importantly a form of advocacy and that their works would become part of the AFAD advocacy materials. While the competitive atmosphere provided encouragement for the contestants to do their best, it was the act of sharing their talents for a noble cause that provided the motivation for them to produce *magnum opus* worth the recognition. Out of the ten contestants, nine of them wrote their literary pieces in Filipino and only one entry in English. All of them, albeit distinct in styles and moods, wrote about the common pain brought about by the crime of enforced disappearance and about the significant values of recognizing and protecting human rights as an integral part of development.



Award-winning poet, Jess Santiago, serenades the crowd with his songs.

A Night of Celebration

The AFAD's Human Rights Day celebration culminated with the poetry reading and the awarding ceremony held on 8 December at Access Point Resto Bar and Grill, Scout Borromeo St., South Triangle, Quezon City. More than sixty people coming from different human rights and civil society organizations, families of the disappeared, government agencies, diplomatic community and friends of AFAD were present to grace the event.

Mr. Jess Santiago and Ms. Dom-an Macagne-Manegdeg performed at various times throughout the evening. Human rights activist and musician, Santiago, who is also an award-winning poet himself having had his poems published in both national and international magazines and having been chosen as the Institute of Philippine Languages' Poet of the Year in 1978 and 1979, serenaded the crowd with a rendition of his 1990 popular song, *Halina* (Come). Ms. Florence Macagne-Manegdeg, also known as Dom-an, a nose flute player from Sagada and a widow of a slain NGO-church worker, Jose (Pepe) Rivala Manegdeg III who was engaged in the peace and healing initiatives, rendered an instrumental music of the sacred breath by playing the flute. In the interlude, she told the crowd that she no longer dwelt in anger and sorrow for her husband's murder and in fact, had already forgiven the perpetrators. Through her own music and poetry, she shared her journey towards the peace and healing of the rest of humanity.

To elicit audience participation, the celebration provided everyone the opportunity to read poems. Commissioner Jose Manuel Mamauag of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) delivered a strong message about the human rights situation in the Philippines. Ms. Ana Galindo of the Embassy of Spain took the center stage to read a poem in Spanish which she translated to English. Other representatives of human rights NGOs took turns in reading poems. Also present during the event was a representative from the Indonesian Embassy, Mr. Hadi Tjahjono.

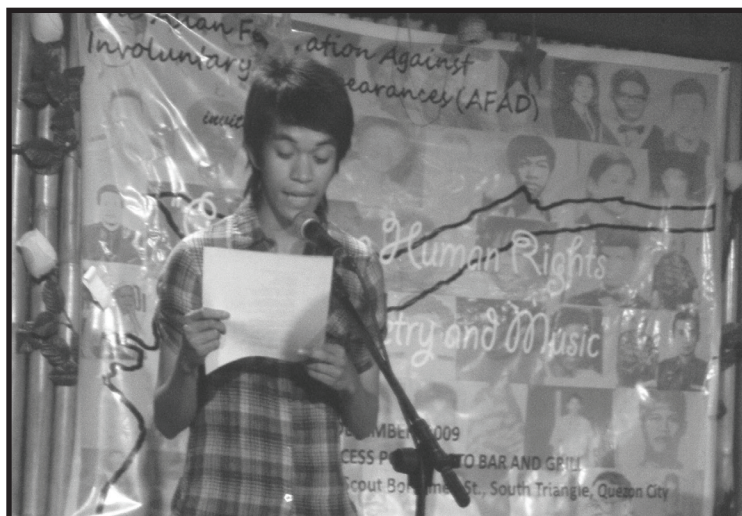
Nevertheless, the evening still principally belonged to the contestants who came to the event in order to compete and to share their talents to the cause for the disappeared. When the poetry reading contest began, the contestants took turns in reading their poems with virtuosity, mindful or perhaps, unmindful that only one among them would be chosen as the Best Presenter.

Prior to the event, the AFAD Secretariat selected two panels of judges for the contests. The judges were chosen from the local human rights community and friends from the academe. They are not only known for their significant contribution to human rights but also for their talents in the field of the literary arts. The panel of judges for poetry writing contest was composed of Mr. Ed Gerlock, Executive Director of the Coalition of the Services for the Elderly (COSE); Mr. Joey Faustino, Council member of the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND); Prof. Virgilio Rivas, Director of the Institute for Social History-PUP and Dr. Nymia Simbulan, Executive Director of the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (Philrights). Dr. Nymia Simbulan and Mr. Joey Faustino remained until the end of the program of the poetry reading contest. They were joined by Commissioner Mamauag for the selection of the Best Presenter.

When all was said and done, the evening came to a close with the announcement and awarding of winners by Dr. Nymia Simbulan, Dr. Emilia Aquino, AFAD Administrative Officer and Mary Aileen D. Bacalso, AFAD Secretary-General. The major awards for both contests went to Mr. Victor Guerrero Ferdinez, a son of a Filipino *desaparecido*, Mr. Victorio Ferdinez who disappeared in Marulas, Valenzuela City a year before the 1986 EDSA Uprising (Please see the translated winning piece



CHR Commissioner Mamauag delivers a strong message against killings and disappearances.



Best Presenter, Larry Clarinan reads the best poem.

at the back cover of this publication). His mother, Ms. Sarah Ferdinez is a member of FIND and a volunteer of the *Bantayog ng mga Bayani*. Victor, who almost failed to make it that evening, appeared cheerfully to receive his award for his best poem, *Ang Patlang* (The Gap). His friend, Mr. Larry Clarinan, whom Victor requested at the last minute to read his piece, was named as the Best Presenter. The other contestants who were lauded with the well-deserved recognition were Mr. Rojo Guerrero Mallari and Ms. Jan Joy Louise Crismo for winning the second and third prizes respectively. Mr. Rojo Mallari, a senior student of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines is working as an intern for the *Bantayog ng mga Bayani*. Ms. Jan Joy Louise Crismo is a daughter of Mr. Louie Crismo, a former Secretary General of FIND and younger brother of Romeo Crismo who disappeared in 1980 during the dark years of martial law in the Philippines. Although, all contestants were awarded with certificates, the AFAD Secretariat deemed it important to give special awards to two entries. These special awards were given to Mr. Jan Merck Maguddayao, a student activist for the University of the Philippines and Mr. John Kenneth Macaspac, a student of TRACE College-Makati.

When everyone thought that the night was over, the lights dimmed and started to flicker. To the audience's delight, the resident band emerged and performed. They were later joined by the two contestants, Kenneth and his schoolmate, Casey Bautista who entertained everyone with their talents in music.

As the music continued, the mood and atmosphere further turned celebratory and went on until the dead of the night. Truly, poetry and music provide a message of celebration. The occasion was not just a

mere fancy that passes for a flitting moment, but an attempt to tell the truth in a meaningful and fuller fashion. Others insist that ideas can change the world, yet poetry and music may not change the world. But as an art, they enable us to see life in its wholeness, with a greater clarity and deeper understanding of what we are and what we can become.

Indeed, the great theatre of the world, according to John Holcombe in his article posted in www.textetc.com, is written in verse and its melody reconciles us to the manifest absurdities, injustices and cruelties of our times.



Darwin Mendiola is currently the Philippine Advocacy Project Coordinator of the AFAD. He has worked in various non-government organizations that engage the Philippine government in formulating and implementing policy reforms and institutional changes. Darwin is a former media liaison of the *Laban ng Masa* (Struggle of the Masses), a new Philippine Left Coalition under the leadership of ex-UP President, Dr. Francisco Nemenzo, Jr. As a former student leader in the Polytechnic University of the Philippines in the early 1990s, he remains an activist in his own right.