

'I WANT TO SH TO THE



OUT WORLD'

Concepcion Empeño is a primary-school headteacher. Raymond Manalo is a farmer. They are both victims of enforced disappearances in the Philippines: her daughter was abducted by the military; he escaped after months of detention and torture. They want you to hear their stories.

It's been five years since Concepcion Empeño last saw or heard from her daughter Karen. She has been told by eyewitnesses that early one morning in January 2006 uniformed men with assault rifles dragged her daughter and a friend out of the house they were staying in. The armed men tore the women's shirts and used the cloth to blindfold them. With their hands tied behind their backs, the two young women were forced into a jeep and driven off in the direction of a military camp several kilometres away. A neighbouring farmer who tried to intervene was also taken away.

Karen Empeño, aged 22 at the time of her disappearance, and Sherlyn Cadapan, then aged 29, were staying with a local family in Bulacan province, near the capital Manila. Karen was researching the living conditions in peasant farmer communities for her sociology degree at the University of the Philippines. Both women were student activists. "In my country", says Concepcion, "If you are an activist or you go to a protest, you are an enemy of the state."

With only these fragments of information, Concepcion Empeño and Erlinda Cadapan, Sherlyn's mother, looked for their daughters in military camps and in morgues. They gave interviews to the media, hoping to put pressure on the abductors to release Sherlyn and Karen. It did not work.

DISSIDENTS DISAPPEAR

Hundreds of activists and political dissidents have disappeared over the last 10 years in the Philippines as the military try to flush out members of the New People's Army (NPA), the military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. In an attempt to "crush" communist insurgency, the military are failing to differentiate between NPA fighters and civilian activists and human rights defenders in rural areas. Few investigations take place into allegations of abductions, torture and killings, resulting in a culture of impunity where hardly anyone is brought to justice for these crimes.

Raymond Manalo, aged 29, survived to tell his story – he is one of the few abductees who have. Raymond and his brother Reynaldo were taken from his family home by armed men in February 2006. The Philippines security forces accused the brothers of being members of the NPA – an accusation which they have denied.

During detention, Raymond and Reynaldo were repeatedly tortured by their military jailers. "We lived like their slaves", Raymond says, "I still have



scars where they branded my skin with searing hot tin cans. They kicked me, smacked me with wood and beat me while pouring running water into my nose.”

The brothers had already been moved several times from one secret detention place to another when they were taken to an officer’s farm in Pangasinan province, northern Philippines. During this time they attempted to gain the trust of their captors by claiming they wanted to become soldiers themselves. One day, 18 months after he was taken from his home, the soldiers guarding Raymond fell asleep, drunk. He woke his brother: “It was time to leave and make our escape... My brother and I fled and made it to the highway. As luck would have it, just as we got out a bus went past. We flagged it down and got on.”

Since his escape, Raymond has spoken out not only of his own nightmare but has described seeing other detainees. Among them were Karen and Sherlyn. “I saw a woman in chains. She said she was Sherlyn Cadapan, and that she had been abducted in Bulacan. We also met Karen Empeño.” Raymond says he witnessed their torture:

“I heard a woman screaming pleading for mercy. That got me worried. I couldn’t do anything so I just pretended to be asleep but I was awake the whole time. One of the guards woke me up and ordered me to make food for them. I left the hut and went to the kitchen where I saw Sherlyn Cadapan. She was stripped almost naked. She was hanging upside down. They were

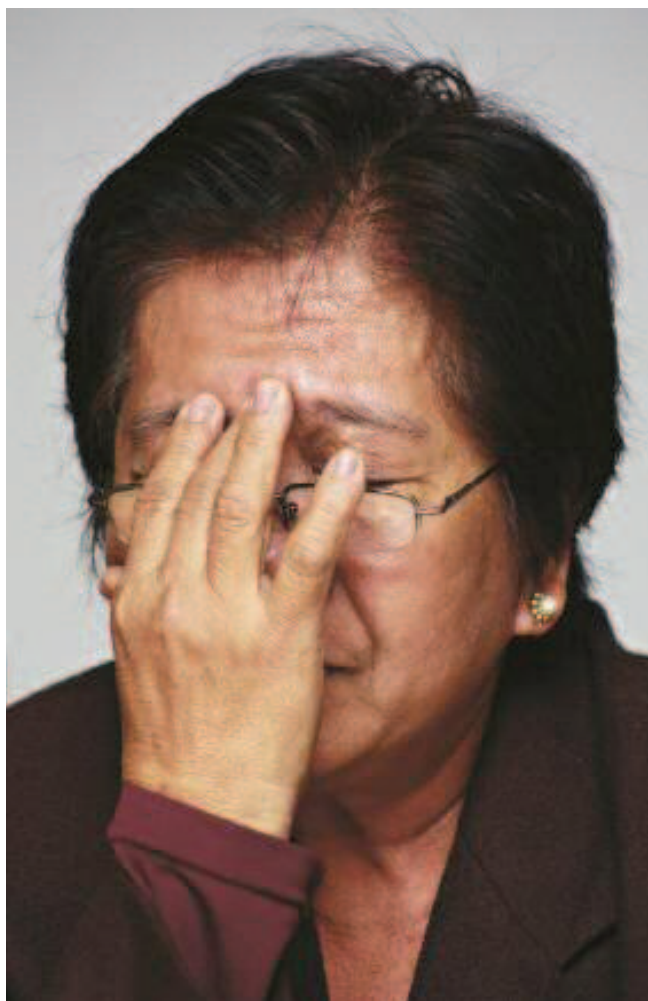
hitting her in the stomach. They poured water over her and played with her genitals. They inserted a piece of wood there and kept on poking it. I saw Karen rolled up near Sherlyn. She was also almost naked. Her skin was covered in cigarette burns.

The next day they ordered me to wash bloodied clothes. I washed women’s underwear covered in blood. They asked my brother Reynaldo to rinse out buckets of girls’ urine. The urine was mixed with blood too. When we were brought back to camp Karen and Sherlyn were gone. I never saw them again.”

Raymond’s account shattered Concepcion’s hope that her daughter would be unharmed. “The only hope I have left is that she is still alive”, she says. “Even after more than four years of searching, above anything else, this remains in my heart that my daughter will be coming at any time and is still alive.”

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Three years after his escape, Raymond Manalo is still trying to get justice. “I’m very angry because I was abused and I don’t even understand why. I have found the strength to speak out because I want justice for the abuses I experienced, and for those suffered by others who have disappeared.” His attempts to file a criminal case against the soldiers who abducted and



Previous page and above: Raymond Manalo and Concepcion Empeño speaking in London, UK, October 2010. All pictures © Amnesty International.

tortured him have been delayed or dismissed by the courts. In the meantime, he lives in fear. "I am free, but I am not really free. The soldiers can take me again any time, all they need to do is take off their uniforms and do it anonymously."

Concepcion Empeño too is now dedicated to doing what she can to give a voice to Karen and other victims of enforced disappearances in the Philippines.

"From a simple mother and elementary school principal I became a spokesperson for my missing daughter", she says. "I learned to speak in front of the media and found myself addressing rallies and marching together with other families of the disappeared and killed." She is now the vice-chairperson of Desaparecidos, a group made up of the families of those who have been forcibly disappeared.

"I want to shout to the world about the human rights violations taking place in the Philippines," says Concepcion. "My husband and I did not tire, we are still not tired. It only pushed us further and made us pick up where Karen left off and made us the parents Karen would be proud of."

ACT NOW

Please write to President Aquino, urge him to take a strong stance to end enforced disappearances, torture and political killings in the Philippines. Ask him to make his first year in office a historic one by signing the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances. The Convention needs to be ratified by just one more country to come into force.

To download a sample letter, go to snipr.com/1i40ft

Write to:

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