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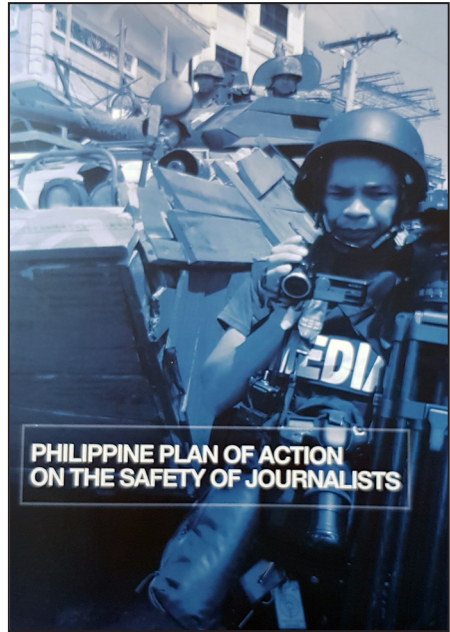
## Safeguarding press freedom, ending impunity in the Philippines

***Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists.*** Manila: Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication and International Media Support. 2019. 45 pages. ISBN 9789718502204

A DECADE after the world's worst atrocity inflicted on journalists in a single event, a remarkable publishing event happened in Manila that could set a trend in the global fight against impunity for the killers of journalists. On the eve of the date marking the massacre of 58 people—including 32 journalists, a broad coalition launched a strategic blueprint for the survival of news workers.

I was privileged to be present at this stellar event, the only New Zealand journalist or media academic to be invited to the launch of the Philippine Plan of Action in the Safety of Journalists (PPASJ).

The modest 45-page booklet outlines an ambitious strategy in the face of attacks on the media and journalists across the globe that have been increasing at an alarming rate over the past



three decades. It is the first action plan of its kind in the world and reflects the growing urgency about the challenge of impunity, a programme launched by the United Nations in 2012.

‘Despite the restoration of democracy and human rights by the 1986 People Power revolution that ended two decades of the Marcos dictatorship [1972-1986], attacks against Filipino journalists and the media have persisted,’ notes the Action Plan in its introductory overview. ‘Indeed, today the Philippines annually ranks as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.’

Journalists in the Philippines face both physical and online threats of violence for covering issues related to corruption and crime, explains the Action Plan. At the Pacific Media Centre we have had several students go on intern-

ships to the Philippines and they have witnessed some of the risks first hand.

From July 2016 to October 2018, at least 85 attacks and threats were recorded, 23 of them targeting women. ‘Female journalists particularly carry the brunt of sexual harassment and online trolling and attacks, not only for their stories, but also because of their gender,’ warns the Action Plan.

No less than 165 journalists have been killed in the Philippines since 1986—and 13 have died since the current President Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016.

Violence against journalists in the Philippines takes place in a climate of impunity, as reflected in the Maguindanao atrocity of 23 November 2009 on the southern island of Mindanao when a private army of the powerful, corrupt and ruthless Ampatuan clan slaughtered 58 people, including 32 journalists. Of the victims, 20 were women. The assassins then attempted to cover up their gruesome crime by trying unsuccessfully to bury their victims in shallow graves dug with a backhoe. Some bodies remained scattered on the ground, uncovered or with just a thin layer of banana leaves over them.

A decade later, there was still no justice, even though the trial of 109 accused had been taking place over nine years and arrest warrants were out for a further 80 suspects (Robie, 2020). Fortunately, two weeks after the Action Plan launch, on 19 December 2019 the Philippine Quezon City court judge in the Ampatuan massacre case

made judgments in a partial resolution and in defiance of fears for her own personal safety.

Judge Jocelyn Solis-Reyes found the ‘masterminds of this horrific crime’—brothers Andal Ampatuan Jr and Zaldy Ampatuan Jr—guilty and sentenced them to life in prison without parole. A total of 28 were convicted of murder and were imprisoned for 40 years minus up to 10 years already served and a further 15 were jailed as accessories (Conde, 2019).

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists 2018 Global Impunity Index report, *Getting Away With Murder*, ranks the Philippines as the fifth worst among countries where journalists are killed and their killers go free (Witchel, 2018).

‘Crafting the Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists gives us a sense of optimism that we can address the scourges of press freedom in the country,’ notes Ramon Tuazon, president of the Manila-based Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC) and secretary-general of the Asian Media Information and Communication (AMIC), one of the plan's co-authors and a speaker at the launch. He adds:

Not to plan is to surrender to our fate. Not to plan should not be an option for the Philippines and many other countries worldwide experiencing similar challenges.

The stakeholders we’ve worked with in developing the PPASJ may represent diverse interests and backgrounds, but we have a common goal:

to safeguard press freedom in the Philippines. (UNESCO, 2019)

The PPASJ was developed under the Safeguarding Press Freedom in the Philippines Project funded by the European Union and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and implemented by the AIJC and International Media Support (IMS). IMS and AIJC forged partnerships with Filipino media organisations to form the Journalist Safety Advisory Group (JSAG), which helped develop the PPASJ and will monitor its implementation.

The Philippine partners are the Centre for Community Journalism and Development (CCJD), Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR), National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) and the Philippine Press Institute (PPI). UNESCO provided technical advice throughout the project and supported the launch.

As one of the plan's supporters, IMS, notes in its own Annual Report for 2019: 'One of the antidotes to disinformation is a healthy media ecosystem, with ethical and investigative journalism as important pillars to ensure this'. To achieve this laudable objective, the safety of journalists is vital.

The Action Plan provides a roadmap for addressing the 'concrete flagship areas' regarded as crucial to improving the safety of journalists and the media environment in the Philippines over five years from 2020 to 2024. These five key areas are: 1. Integrity and professionalism; 2. Conducive working conditions; 3. Safety and

protection mechanisms; 4. Criminal justice system; 5. Public information, journalism education and research.

Clearly this is an enviable model for other countries to emulate and there is much to inspire journalism educators and researchers.

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