

## Church Voice is as Strong as Ever – Bishop Bolocon

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**BY RAINER WERNING**

**Contributed to Bulatlat**

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Bishop Elmer Bolocon was the General Secretary of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) from 1998 to 2006 and has served as the General Secretary of the Ecumenical Bishops Forum (EBF). Bishop Bolocon testified as an expert witness during the second session on the Philippines of the Permanent People’s Tribunal (PPT) in Den Haag, The Netherlands in March 2007.

Dr. Rainer Werning, a German journalist and academician, interviewed the UCCP bishop on the sidelines of the PPT on March 22, 2007 about the interfaith community whose members have become victims of summary execution and other atrocities believed to be perpetrated by military-sponsored death squads. Meanwhile, Bolocon was recently hospitalized for weeks.

Excerpts of that interview:

**Rainer Werning (RW):** Since January 2001 until March 2007, how many of your church colleagues got into trouble, that is, were killed or harrassed by state authorities?

**Elmer Bolocon (EB):** From 2004 until the present, 17 UCCP people were killed. Among them were three ordained ministers of the church and one lay pastor. The rest are lay leaders and young people.

**RW:** You mentioned in your speech yesterday the case of a young promising Pastor Lapus. Could you elaborate on that case? It seems it was quite a spectacular one, wasn’t it?

**EB:** Rev. Edison Lapus was a conference minister of Northeast Leyte Conference, a very active young pastor who got elected to the top position. He was being groomed to become bishop of the Eastern Visayas jurisdiction the creation of which he was coordinating at that time. He was very active in the community work for fishermen and farmers in his area and he helped them fight for their land rights. He was well loved by the people. But he was killed by the military on May 12, 2005. Days before he was killed, his whereabouts had been asked by a Lieutenant Mangohon. Mangohon went to the house of Lapus’s parents several times. We learned that his father became suspicious of Lieutenant Mangohon warning him that if something happened to the reverend he would be held liable. At night of May 12, Reverend Lapus had left the burial of his father in law and was walking along with friends and relatives when two men approached him and pumped bullets into his body. He died instantly.

**RW:** Why do you think government authorities are so harsh when it comes to committed pastors or priests working in the rural areas?

**EB:** I think the main reason is that they suspect our pastors who are serious in their ministry of helping the poor to be sympathisers of rebels if not rebels themselves or members of the NPA (New People’s Army). Actually, that is what they say, they are members of the NPA and so they get killed as part of Oplan Bantay Laya (Operation Freedom Watch) program of the military. The killings of our pastors started in 2004.

**RW:** Is there a connection between the killings and the over-all war against terror declared by Bush administration in the U.S.?

**EB:** I would say, yes. The Philippine president, Gloria Arroyo, is the No. 1 supporter of Bush's anti-terror war.

**RW:** You said 17 members of the UCCP have been killed since 2004. Are there cases in Mindanao like in Misamis, and if so can you elaborate on this?

**EB:** Yes, there is one which victimized an ordained minister, Rev. Jeremias Tinambacan. The pastor was on his way home on board a vehicle, together with his wife when they were ambushed. Both of them were hit. Luckily, the wife – Rev. Marilou Tinambacan – survived. She identified one of the assailants as a military asset.

**RW:** You also mentioned yesterday some sources and documents linking the military to the killings. How were you able to avail of such documents and what makes you sure those are original documents coming from the security forces that, for example, put the UCCP on the list?

**EB:** Yes, there is a PowerPoint presentation that was being shown around by the military since 2005 about organizations that they said are infiltrated or are fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines. UCCP was mentioned in a list of church institutions, along with the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, the Association of Major Religious Superiors, Philippine Independent Church, United Methodist Church, National Council of Churches in the Philippines, and so many others.

**RW:** Has anybody been held responsible so far for the killing of those 17 church people?

**EB:** No one, as far as I know. The standard response of the military and police is that the killings are either the handiwork of the rebels as part of their internal purge or are common crimes. For example, they said Reverend Lapus was killed because of a land controversy.

**RW:** Churches in Western Europe were much more committed during the Marcos years than nowadays. When I myself talk to church people in Germany, they are rather tight-lipped unlike during the Marcos times when they were very outspoken, using their international leverage to criticize such practices in the Philippines.

**EB:** Our partner churches do speak out today. We bring our issues to our partner churches in the United States like the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ USA, Reform Church in America. And they all send us solidarity messages, and they also called on their own government to do something about these issues. Only a few days ago, the U.S. Congress began looking into the killings.

**RW:** And what about German partner churches?

**EB:** German partner churches particularly members of the United Evangelical Mission, Wuppertal-based are very strong and their response has been very encouraging. They help us expose these issues. One of their members joined a fact finding mission in July 2005. They also sent financial support for the victims, for the studies of children of victims.

**RW:** What is it that seems to be very urgent in your viewpoint that needs to be addressed? What should be done in the current situation?

**EB:** These killings should stop. Because even after the situation had been exposed and there were already pressures from Amnesty International, from the United Nations Special Rapporteurs, the killings have still continued. This should stop and the perpetrators of these killings should be brought to court and properly penalized and victims indemnified. **Contributed to Bulatlat**

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