



### **MAY 2015: A TRIBE'S OPPRESSION AND A FRIEND'S DISSAPEARANCE**

*Reported by Jonathan Cranston, Information and Communications Team*

*This month we mourned the disappearance and probable murder of a friend and fellow advocate for social justice here in the southern Philippines. We had been working with him to seek redress for systemic injustices that have hounded and afflicted his tribe for many years.*



For decades, an indigenous southern Philippine tribe called the Dulangan Manobo have been forced to struggle for the right to live and to practice their livelihoods in their own ancestral territory. Since 1992, when unscrupulous logging companies began operating in the tribe's home territory, Dulangan Manobo spokespersons have reported a series of atrocities committed against tribe members by the companies, their security guards, and a militia force which the companies sponsor. The companies have destroyed many tribe members' houses and crops, and tribal representatives allege that company guards and militia have murdered a number of tribespeople.

It seems also that the companies have maneuvered to frustrate the tribe's attempts to have their ancestral territory surveyed and formally recognized by the Philippine government. To this day, the Dulangan Manobo have no formal title to their lands. Without a title, the Dulangan Manobos have no legal means to halt the destruction of their homes, farms, and forests. Often, they cannot travel to or from their own villages without passing through checkpoints manned by militiamen and rifle-toting company guards, who monitor their movements in a way that the tribe finds humiliating. Abject poverty and hunger confront those tribespeople whose crops have been destroyed.

Dulangan Manobo leaders have petitioned the national government to give the tribe a title to their lands and to revoke the contracts that allow the companies to operate in Dulangan Manobo territory. The tribe have also appealed repeatedly to the office of the Philippine president. But government help has been minimal, and their plight remains desperate.



Several years ago, we of *PeaceBuilders Community, Inc. (PBCI)* and *Coffee For Peace (CFP)* began a relationship with the Dulangan Manobo through a training program on coffee cultivation and a seminar on peacebuilding that we presented in the Dulangan Manobo village of Elem. The tribe told us of their struggle, and we resolved to share their journey and help them in any way we could. Last December, five Dulangan Manobo tribal advocates visited the PBCI offices in Davao City, where together we drafted a fresh appeal to the president of the Philippines.

One of the five tribesmen with whom we drafted the appeal was a young man named John Calaba. He was a passionate and dedicated campaigner for the cause of tribal rights. During a strategy meeting in January, he gave us an SD card containing photos



of the destruction of the tribe's territory. As we browsed the images, the tribesmen pointed out bulldozed clearings where there had been plots of valuable coffee trees raised by the tribe from Coffee For Peace seedlings. The pictures also showed a bare, leveled mountaintop, muddy gashes cut deep into the sides of hills, and wide swathes of jungle bulldozed. All of these pictures had been taken clandestinely, John said, by him and a partner, who risked their lives to document this destruction in an area closely monitored by the company guards. We bought John a new cellphone so that he could keep us updated.

On April 30, John disappeared. According to witness affidavits, three militia members invited him to a meal at their outpost. A few minutes later, a tribesman passing by the post saw John inside eating. Shortly thereafter, tribespeople heard gunfire erupt at the post. The firing continued for half an hour. Dulangan Manobos who went to investigate were warned away by the post commander, who claimed that the post was under attack by guerillas, though tribal representatives regard this claim as a mere ruse used to cover John's murder.

Witnesses later observed six militiamen descending from the outpost to their truck. They were carrying something wrapped in a tarp, which they placed in the truck bed and drove away, leaving a trail of blood drips in the road. John's body has not been recovered, and Elem's residents say they have heard rumors that further violence is coming.

On May 18, as fear and anger continued to mount in Elem, five tribal representatives travelled to the PBCI offices in Davao. Together we mourned John's death and strategized ways to promote peace and justice in the Dulangan Manobo ancestral territory. We appointed the five visiting representatives as our Peace And Reconciliation (PAR) monitors, and issued them PBCI ID badges. PBCI CEO Rev. Daniel Pantoja trained the five in observation and information gathering. Now that they are back in Elem, we pray God's protection over them, and we reiterate our commitment to stand with them and their tribe as we look forward to God's transformation of their circumstances. Please, sisters and brothers, pray with us.



For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. - 1 Cor. 3:11