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US labor lawyer turned back at NAIA

On way to ASEAN parallel meet

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INQ7.net Agence France-Presse

Posted date: December 07, 2006

CEBU CITY -- (UPDATE) An American labor lawyer scheduled to attend a civil society conference parallel to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Business Forum here was denied entry at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) late Wednesday evening.

Brian Campbell is believed to be the first foreign activist on the way to attending alternative forums and activities in the course of the 12th ASEAN Summit to be turned away.

Immigration officials on Thursday confirmed stopping Campbell and putting him on the next flight back to Hong Kong.

"I can confirm a Brian Campbell was detained," the head of immigration at the airport, Ferdinand Sampol, told Agence France-Presse. "He was put on the next flight back to Hong Kong."

Theresa Lauron, of the research group IBON and general secretary of the Asia Pacific Research Network (APRN), told INQ7.net that Campbell, of the Washington DC-based International Labor Rights Fund, was turned back by immigration officials at NAIA.

She said Campbell is supposed to attend Thursday's conference on jobs and justice, an annual meeting of the APRN at the Saint Theresa's College here as a counterpoint to the ASEAN Business Forum.

Lauron said her group was expecting Campbell to arrive here at 8:45 p.m. Wednesday night, but an e-mail from Campbell confirmed his deportation.

In his letter to Lauron from Hong Kong, a copy of which was provided INQ7.net, Campbell said he was able to view the list of foreigners that Philippine immigration officials were planning to deny entry as well. He said among them were fellow American lawyers who were going to same conference he was.

One immigration official who did not want to be identified confirmed the existence of a blacklist but could not give details.

"All I can tell you is that the American has been involved in human rights activities in China," the official said.

According to the Cebu Daily News, around 150 foreign activists are on the list and plan to join demonstrations during the summit.

Campbell decried his "expulsion from the Philippines" even as he was not told the "exact nature of [his] transgression." He said he viewed the action against him "as just another small part of the government's concerted long-standing campaign to silence the critics of the Arroyo regime and the political killings."

Earlier this year, Campbell joined the International Solidarity Mission organized by the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights and the Ecumenical Institute of Labor Education and Research, a fact-finding mission to look into the summary killings of labor leaders.

He said he was looking forward to the Cebu conference where he was scheduled to meet the family of murdered Philippine Independent Church Bishop Alberto Ramento to discuss how his organization and similar organizations could help continue the slain prelate's work, particularly in support of the workers in Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac.

"Unfortunately, I have been denied entry into the country. And, I, along with many other participants of the last May's International Labor Solidarity Mission, have been blacklisted from returning to the Philippines," Campbell said in a letter.

"I am not the only attorney barred from the country. When attempting to determine why I was on the blacklist, I was able to see other names of human rights attorneys who have also been barred entry," he said.

"Though I was only able to take a glance at the list, I recognized the names of other well-known US human rights attorneys, including Atty. Rachel Lederman and Tina Monshipur Foster, who were both recently the guests of Gabriela and Karapatan and published a report in the United States critical of the Arroyo government efforts to bring an end to the killings," he added.

Campbell decried the human rights situation in the Philippines.

"What is clear, though, is that rule of law and freedom of speech is suffering in the Philippines today," he said.

"As the Philippines moves further away from the principle upon which it was founded, people are afraid to speak out for fear of being listed on the [military's] Order of Battle, something far worse than the blacklist I am on," he said.

Campbell also doubted the chances of success of the Melo Commission, created by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to investigate political killings after she came under increasing international criticism for the country's human rights situation, saying "any investigation will remain inadequate so long as the people are afraid to speak and those who order the killings remain in leadership position in the police and military."

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