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Deported lawyer prodded US firms to sign letter on killings

By Marlon Ramos
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THE American labor lawyer who deported upon his arrival at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) Wednesday was instrumental in the issuance of a letter of concern from US retail giants over political killings in the Philippines, a non-government organization said Friday.

The Cavite-based Workers Assistance Center (WAC) said Brian Campbell and his group, the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), were among those who lobbied for US business groups to ask President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to act on the extrajudicial killings, which had also victimized labor leaders.

The letter also warned the government that the killings had been affecting the confidence of foreign businessmen investing in the Philippines.

Campbell, a lawyer for the Washington-based ILRF, visited Calamba, Laguna last May as part of the official delegation of the International Labor Solidarity Mission that investigated the murders of union officers and their supporters.

During his visit, Campbell told the Inquirer that the Philippines now ranked second to Colombia as the most dangerous place for trade union organizers.

Fr. Jose Dizon, WAC executive director, said the ILRF wrote about its concern to the President and asked her to act to end all political violence against labor rights leaders and activists in the Philippines.

In a statement sent to the Inquirer, Dizon lambasted immigration officials for ordering Campbell's exclusion without any clear and lawful explanation for their actions.

Campbell was briefly detained at the NAIA upon his arrival from the US via Hong Kong and was barred from entering the country. He was then ordered to board the next flight back to Hong Kong.

Dizon said the incident only showed the "increasing paranoia" of Arroyo from being criticized abroad.

The priest said Campbell's deportation could be the government's way to exact revenge on the labor lawyer and his group.

"Definitely, the strong advocacy of Campbell and his organization...is an affront to the [government's] policies of silencing the militant and progressive labor movement," Father Dizon said.

He said Campbell immediately called up their office shortly after he arrived in Hong Kong at around 10 p.m.

"He called up our office and narrated that he was not even allowed by immigration officials in the Philippines to make a phone call," he said.

Dizon claimed Campbell would not join any protest actions in Cebu City but was to attend the Jobs and Justice Conference last Thursday.

He said Campbell was also scheduled to join WAC's tribute for slain Aglipayan Bishop Alberto Ramento in Bacoor, Cavite on Saturday.

Before his murder, Ramento, of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI), was the chairman of the board of WAC.

The priest said the lawyer had no plans to join the rallies in Cebu as he had to leave the country on the early morning of December 11.

"He should have been spared from such kind of harsh treatment," Father Dizon lamented, adding: "Activists and human rights advocates in and out of the country are not free anymore to roam the streets of the so-called Philippine democracy."

He added that Campbell likewise planned to talk with the striking workers of Korean companies Chong Won Fashion Inc. and Phils Jeon Garments Inc. at the Cavite Export Processing Zone.

The two companies are suppliers of US retail giant Wal-Mart, which also signed the petition against rising political violence in the country.

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