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Philippines: Journalist and human rights defender Roy Barbosa harassed during protest at the Malolos Regional Trial Court

On 3 September 2024, human rights defender Roy Barbosa was reportedly harassed and threatened by an individual claiming to be a 'vlogger' while covering a protest action at the Malolos Regional Trial Court Branch 12, Bulacan.

Roy Barbosa is a human rights defender and a news editor at Manila Today, an alternative media outlet focusing on reporting issues affecting marginalized sectors in the National Capital Region of the Philippines. The human rights defender's career in journalism began as a campus journalist, and in 2020, they became the Regional Coordinator of the College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP) for NCR. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Roy Barbosa played a key role in rebuilding and strengthening campus publications. They have been contributing to Manila Today since 2019 and went full-time in 2020, using this platform to report on youth, women, workers, and other underrepresented groups. Their commitment to journalism has taken them to remote and far-flung communities, where they have amplified the stories and struggles of marginalized sectors.

On 3 September 2024, while covering the protest at the Malolos Regional Trial Court Branch 12, Roy Barbosa was confronted by an individual claiming to be a 'vlogger' who refused to identify himself. Roy Barbosa was spat on, yelled at, and discriminated against in reference to their non-binary identity. The unidentified individual threatened legal action if Roy Barbosa did not delete the footage. Roy Barbosa was escorted away from the site by their colleagues. However, the same individual, accompanied by a police mobile and five police personnel, intercepted Roy Barbosa's colleagues and reportedly threatened them with legal action if they did not disclose Roy Barbosa's whereabouts.

On the same day, Roy Barbosa published a report detailing the harassment they had experienced. Shortly after, they received a message via Facebook from an anonymous account disclosing Roy Barbosa's full name, threatening and red-tagging them—a smear tactic used against human rights defenders—accusing them of belonging to the New People's Army.

The protest that Roy Barbosa covered took place during the filing of a legal motion to dismiss charges against labor rights defenders. Ed Cubelo and Rodrigo Esparago who were accused under anti-terrorism laws. The Malolos Regional Trial Court ultimately issued a joint order dismissing the case, stating that there was not enough evidence to proceed.

This was not the first instance of intimidation and harassment faced by Roy Barbosa in connection to the reporting of Ed Cubelo and Rodrigo Esparago's case. On 11 July 2024, Roy Barbosa received a message from an unknown sender warning against supporting the Communist Party of the Philippines – New People's Army (CPP-NPA) or recent victims involved in cases related to the anti-terror law. The message also contained implied threats, suggesting that further legal actions might be taken against others, including them.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the harassment and intimidation against the journalist human rights defender Roy Barbosa and is concerned about a broader attempt to target and

intimidate human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, which puts their lives at risk and contributes to a climate of fear and intimidation.

Front Line urges the relevant authorities in the Philippines to:

1. Ensure the safety and protection of Roy Barbosa and immediately investigate the harassment and threats against Roy Barbosa, including the role of police personnel in the incident, and hold those responsible accountable.
2. Uphold the protection of non-binary and LGBTQ+ human rights defenders , ensuring they are not subjected to discrimination or violence based on their identity.
3. Ensure the safety and protection of human rights defenders working on issues affecting marginalized communities so they can continue their work without fear of retaliation, harassment, or legal persecution.
4. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in the Philippines can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals.

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