

'They hear but they don't listen': A reflection on the UNHRC sessions

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When I first attended the UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva in March 2010, I only had one thing in mind—I wanted to tell the 'world' and 'international community' about the violations of rights and the suffering of Filipinos at home. I wanted them to do something. The nearly 14-hour flight from Hong Kong and the days of jetlag—it being my first long haul flight—were a small discomfort for this opportunity.

In my mind, it was an opportunity for me to tell the stories of how and why the rights of the victims and their families were violated, and how they suffer. They themselves are not in a position to travel to Geneva; for me to have that opportunity was something I treasured dearly. The idea of being able to speak for those who could not; to talk to people who could do something for the absentee victims, was very motivating.

I was prepared to talk and discuss these issues. All the cases I documented myself flashed clearly in my mind: the extrajudicial killings of human rights and political activists, some of whom were known to me; the torture and enforced disappearance of others, and many more. These were stories I wished to share, with the hope that those who were in a position to do something, would listen and do so.

2013V7N5P02.jpg It was therefore a shock for me to realize that in reality hardly anyone was interested in speaking to you or listening to your stories. Even at the plenary session, the UNHRC would give you no more than two minutes to speak, and that too, only if you are lucky after registering to get a chance to make an oral intervention. That first visit shattered my illusions and assumptions regarding why the 'world' and 'international community' were there, and what they could do. While that was a deeply traumatic experience for me, it nevertheless gave me much food for thought for any future trips to Geneva.

During my subsequent attendance of these UNHRC sessions, in September 2012 and, recently September 2013, I was emotionally and mentally prepared. The best preparation, in my opinion, is to go not expecting anything fruitful to come from the sessions. This will, at the very least, help attendees—particularly the victims and their families—in maintaining their sanity.

My observations regarding lobbying at the UN, lead me to conclude that it is necessary to disconnect from your emotions and frustrations regarding cases and stories of human rights abuse, in order to do something. This requires training, and is known as diplomacy and international relations. It has become clear to me during my trips to UN meetings in Geneva that I can never be a diplomat and foreign relations officer; I am too emotional. I feel no shame in admitting this. Emotion is what keeps us moving, it is what makes us humans, what allows us to show compassion to our fellow men and women. A lack of emotions would be problematic in understanding the suffering of victims and families who need to be assisted, and any assistance given in such a manner could only be superficial and short lived.

One of the very frustrating experiences at the UN was the scene at break time, of NGO staff presenting victims and their families to diplomats and liaison officers, to tell their stories at an often crowded, noisy and busy basement coffee shop. How could these diplomats, including officers at the UN, pay attention to, understand and remember what the victims, their families and the NGOs have to say in a meeting that lasts for just a few minutes? It is beyond my ability or comprehension, but they apparently have figured it all out.

The coffee shop is a common meeting place for victims and families to lobby with the diplomats, UN officers and staffs, and interested NGOs. They hope these people would speak in support of the victim

during the plenary, if not in support of a UN resolution and reports concerning a violation in a country. While a UN resolution could result from the victims' lobby, the arrest of the perpetrators rarely occurs.

In fact, one of the clear examples of the UN's failure was the war in Syria. In September 2012, I was present when the HRC was already debating and discussing the deteriorating situation and enormous loss of lives there; one year later, they were still discussing the same thing. Looking at Syria's experience, regardless of the severity of the violations—the targeting of civilians in war, the unprecedented scale of refugees heading to other countries—neither diplomacy nor foreign relations have saved the lives of affected Syrians.

I am not discounting lobbying at the UN; in fact, I am still convinced of its importance. Something should however, be done to improve the experience, rather than let it deteriorate. Otherwise, attending meetings in Geneva will increasingly become a holiday—as it is already known for—rather than an opportunity for victims and their families to talk about their suffering and what could be done for them.

Politics and political interest is understandably a part of diplomacy and foreign relations, however, when politics trumps the protection of rights, then any discourse and debates on human rights become meaningless. Debates and discussion will have meaning when the person who hears really listens.

On most occasions, notably the two-minute oral interventions by accredited NGOs, persons physically present may have heard what one said, but they rarely actively listen. Everyone is eagerly awaiting their turn at the microphone to speak, practicing their speech, looking at the list of speakers to see if they are next, reading and listening to themselves, but hardly anyone listens to others.

This is a loss, not for the victims and their families, but for those lobbying and working at the UN. Unless the knowledge, insights and ideas of the victims, who are themselves evidence of suffering and of the failing systems unable to protect human rights, are heard, listened to and genuinely understood, any action taken by the UN bodies would be a superficial exercise detached from reality. The UN staff and concerned NGOs should seriously review their participation in these sessions, and work towards a more fruitful human rights outcome.