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Targeted by the warlords

The Philippines is now one of the world's deadliest places for journalists. A corrupt elite can hire hitmen for just £20, and few of the killers ever stand trial. Declan Hill reports

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Hekainio Ugaspi considers it fairly routine that in the past two years he has faced death threats, a grenade attack and the murder of two colleagues. "A normal part of our duties as a radio broadcaster," is how he styles it. Ugaspi is the station manager of Radio Bombo in Koronadal city on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao. The station is not a fancy place, just a low concrete building surrounded by a wire fence. But remote and ordinary as Radio Bombo is, its occupants' experience is one shared throughout the country's journalistic community. For according to the international group Reporters sans frontières, the Philippines is now one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, after Iraq. Few of the killers have been caught and the journalists have become so accustomed to threats that it has become part of their professional culture.

Glenda Gloria, editor of a Manila news magazine, Newsbreak, received her death threat in an odd way. After she wrote a story about links between the intelligence services and corrupt politicians, a funeral wreath dedicated to her was delivered with a message of condolence attached. "It was sent to my parents' home. It was not really where I live, which was worse because it was my mother who received it."

"Twenty years ago there would have been outrage if a journalist was killed. There is no rage at the moment. There is a culture of impunity in this country that doesn't only apply to journalists. Crime solution here is almost nil." She attributes the problem to modern-day "warlords" who run the country's politics. "They wear suits. They went to business

school. They are the second generation of their fathers. They went to the best schools in the country and abroad. They come home and they campaign before their constituencies. They promise reform: 'I'm a modernist. I will change the way of doing business.' But they don't." Transparency International, the main specialist organisation campaigning against corruption around the world, ranks the Philippines below the likes of Libya and Zambia, and on a par with Russia.

This poses great dangers for investigative reporters. Estimates vary, because watchdog organisations differ in how they compile their figures, but the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines calculates that at least 50 of their colleagues have been killed since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo came to power in 2001. This is a conservative figure - the true number could be much higher if all suspicious deaths of media employees were included.

One of the stars of Philippines journalism worked for Radio Bombo. Her name was Marlene Esperat. She was known as the "Erin Brockovich of the Philippines", and like her American namesake, Esperat had a huge personality and was a tough crusader against corruption.

Her friend Nena Santos describes her: "Marlene is a flamboyant lady. She talks very loudly ... and Marlene makes a room. She tries to befriend everyone in the room. But she speaks her mind and with that some people listen and others do not."

In her last exposé, Esperat accused some officials and politicians of stealing public funds. The central government would send millions of pesos to the Department of Agriculture in Mindanao where, she alleged, two bureaucrats who worked on the financial side kept half and passed the rest on to corrupt politicians - Gloria's warlords - in Manila.

Family and friends still use the present tense when they speak of Esperat, but around Easter two years ago, just as she was sitting down with her family for dinner, a young man came into the room and shot her in the head.

Among those at the dining table was Esperat's son James, then 10

years old. He ran after the killer until he saw him get on a motorcycle and ride away. Now he talks as if his mother would somehow have come back to life if he had caught the murderer. Marlene's husband, George, ran into the room and realised only when he held his wife in his arms that she was dead. "I sat down and I told her, 'Marlene, you should stop this because this is very dangerous.'" Now he sits alone on his porch. It was here that one of the men later convicted in his wife's murder played chess with young James to ingratiate himself with the family and learn about Marlene's movements, so the shooting could be planned.

This man and his accomplice come from the vast pool of potential recruits among the country's poor, according to Red Batario, who runs a Manila-based organisation that tries to help journalists in the Philippines. He estimates that a hitman from the shanty towns can be hired for \$40 (about £20). "The murderers are young guys who have no work, young people who are engaged in petty crime," Batario says. For a corrupt member of the elite bent on silencing a public critic, these small-fry are expendable. Even if a hitman is arrested, "nobody gets to the bottom [of the case]," so it's a repeating cycle.

Convictions are extremely rare, so it is unusual that two men are serving life sentences for the Esperat murder. Gerry Cabayag and Randy Grecia say they were approached by intermediaries representing two government officials who wanted her dead. When we meet during a prison visit, Cabayag, who worked in a furniture shop, maintains that he took the job to pay his mother's hospital bills. He was the one who entered the Esperat dining room with a gun: "I greeted her - 'Good evening, madam' - then she looked at me, stood up, then I shot her."

In this partnership it was Grecia who established access to the family, playing chess with Marlene's son. A few days after the killing, he did something remarkable: he confessed voluntarily, without incentive or reward. He said his conscience was bothering him too much.

The two men claim, and the police believe them, that the people who arranged the shooting of Esperat are very powerful. "She knew too much," says Santos, and "that really got them angry". She, too, has received death threats, and is currently in hiding, because it is she who

has driven the campaign to bring to justice those who ordered the killing. A country lawyer working for nothing, she has doggedly produced the case paperwork and made sure it is filed properly at regional courthouse 12 in southern Mindanao.

Grecia and Cabayag accused two Department of Agriculture officials of masterminding the murder - accusations denied in court documents and publicly by the officials. A case was prepared against them, but the judge found "no probable grounds" to link them to the death, ruling the murder charges against the officials inadmissible. Then case files went missing. There were more delays while Santos worked to get the case reopened and moved to a more neutral venue.

In the midst of this confusion one of the defendants, Sergeant Rowie Barua, changed tack to become a prosecution witness. A former bodyguard in the Department of Agriculture, he claimed that he had arranged the murder on the orders of the two officials. Now he is in witness protection. After days of negotiations, we met in a nondescript office. A tough, muscular, middle-aged man, Barua says bluntly: "The people behind the death of Marlene Esperat are the employees of the Department of Agriculture. I did not kill Marlene Esperat, but I know the whole story behind the murder of Esperat because I was asked to look for a hitman."

Barua cites dates and details, yet the case has been characterised by mistrials, acquittals and delays. This is no huge surprise, says the minister of justice, Raul Gonzalez, because the courts are overstretched and lack the proper resources. But Gonzalez, who was a prominent lawyer during the era of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s and 80s, considers that in general the killing of journalists has been overstated. "There were journalists who were killed because of love affairs. In my place in Iloilo City, for example, I know one specific case of one supposed broadcaster who was gunned down because of a love triangle. Not because of being a broadcaster"

When it is pointed out that between 2000-2005 about 40 journalists had been killed in the Philippines, and one person convicted, Gonzalez says the media have distorted the picture: "I would like to remove the thinking that has been fanned by over-sensationalism in the media that we do not do our job here to prosecute wrong-doers - because we do."

In October last year the justice department was finally able to secure convictions against Cabayag and Grecia. Nothing more happened, until Santos decided to launch a case against the two civil servants and another against the state prosecutor of the Philippines. "What are we going to do if we live in fear?" she asks. "It is as if we are not living any more."

· Since Esperat was murdered, 16 journalists have been killed in the Philippines.

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