

Human Rights

Correspondence School

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August-October 2007

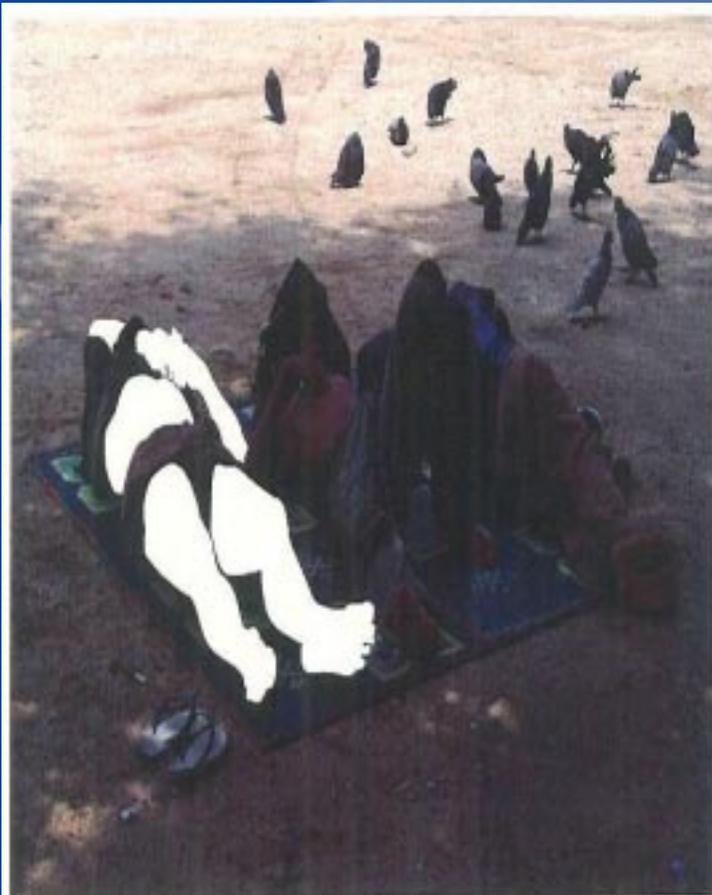
Lesson Series 53

From victims to healers: Rehabilitation for victims of human rights abuse

Summary

This lesson, based on a workshop held for family members of disappeared persons, discusses the importance of counselling and rehabilitation for victims of human rights violations.

Using the experience of three human rights defenders in Asia, the lesson also discusses the importance of including victims in human rights campaigns.



ဟော့ "မေ့မိတ်"
"Body gone; heart there"

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THEME: From victims to healers: Rehabilitation for victims of human rights abuse

The Issue

One of the most immediate needs of victims of grave human rights abuse is rehabilitation. Not only is this important with regard to assisting individuals in dire situations, but it is also important in enabling the individuals to regain their dignity and sense of worth, which will have been greatly affected in most cases. By supporting them and providing the necessary care and counselling, they can be rehabilitated into society. Moreover, after overcoming their tragic experiences, rehabilitation can also help them to organize themselves and become spokespersons for certain causes, to ensure the abuse suffered by them is not suffered by others in future.

The Lessons

This lesson series is based on a workshop held in Satun, southern Thailand, June 2007 for family members of disappeared persons. The workshop was jointly organized by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) and the Working Group on Justice for Peace. (This was the second such workshop held with the same group of participants.)

Lesson 1 outlines the workshop proceedings, which include activities for stress relief and relaxation.

Lesson 2 discusses the importance of rehabilitation and how victims can participate in human rights campaigns.

Cover image of postcard depicting disappearances, designed by Thai artist Chumpol Akapanthanon.

Lesson 1

This lesson is based on a workshop entitled 'From victims to healers', held in southern Thailand, consisting of a training and counselling session for family members of disappeared persons. The underlying principle was to provide a healing session for the participants, through which they would be able to focus on the skills needed in helping others facing similar situations.

Day I

Listening exercise: Sharing feelings

Participants were asked to form small groups and share their feelings of how they are coping now, how the first workshop helped them, how their life has changed and what they have been dealing with since the last workshop. Each group has a speaker who will report back later and everyone is supposed to listen well.

What makes a good listener?

Discussion following the above exercise indicated that these characteristics were needed for good listening:

- Sympathize with the speaker.
- Active sharing, instead of one-sided conversation.
- Pay attention to body language.
- Prepare your mind to be stable and ready to listen to anger, stress, grief and other emotions. Everyone has different problems and different needs. You need to be prepared to adapt to whatever might come.
- Be aware that now you are a caretaker. Be aware of your own body language when listening to others; make sure it makes them feel comfortable. Examine the speaker's body language to determine their emotion.

Discussion on what kind of speech to use when dealing with victims:

- Speak softly and nicely. Before asking them questions about their situation, listen actively. Victims might come with strong emotions, maybe even condemnation directed at you, but you have to stay calm, be impartial, do not take it personally.
- Try to build a good and relaxing environment for the speaker. Be prepared to let them say whatever they wish; in this way, you get to know them better. Find out the real problem or cause of their suffering; they

only tell you the symptoms, you have to find out the root cause.

- Don't use close-ended questions! Don't use commands! No strong questions! Be aware what questions are hurtful to the victims. Since we are all victims we should know what those questions are. Example: "Your husband disappeared. Do you think he's still alive?" Those kinds of questions only make you feel bad.
- Do not instruct! There is a difference between instruction and guidance. Give them choices.
- If you feel you cannot handle listening or feel overwhelmed, feel free to stop and recommend other places or people to the victim. Do not feel bad about that. You are acting in the victim's interest.

Good approach:

Make yourself strong!

Build good environment!

Try to find out as much as possible about them by giving them lots of space!

Give recommendation, choices, advice!

Build confidence!

Let them decide!

This approach will make both sides feel good.

Trust building exercise

Participants get into groups of three. One person is blindfolded. The other two guide the blindfolded person. This exercise is supposed to build trust between the group members and increase the confidence of the blindfolded person.

The blindfolded participants are asked to write down how they felt, what helped them and what did not. The guides are asked to do the same; how do they feel given the responsibility of guiding, what techniques did they use and what obstacles were they facing.

Blindfolded group

They say they initially feel afraid, but become more confident as they are given good guidance and do not feel alone; "When we can't see, we need a lot of trust and good attention from the others." Participants said they trusted their guide 100 per cent because they had no other choice.

Guiding group

Participants were uncomfortable and anxious at having to take care of someone else. They had to be patient, pay close attention so they could guide properly.

Techniques

Good observation, direction, must use understandable language (for instance, describing distance in number of footsteps), must prepare the blindfolded person for any obstacles ahead.

Summary

The blindfolded participants initially felt fear, but slowly built up their comfort and confidence. The guides felt uncomfortable and burdened. You need patience and determination to help the victim go forward. To build trust and confidence, you have to give them moral support. You must make them feel that you're going with them, strengthening the will power of the victim. You have to be sincere and honest, otherwise they cannot trust you.

Participants share their feelings about the disappearance of their loved ones in a group therapy session. Everyone talks and everyone listens.

Day II

Active listening practice

Participants form groups of three: one person is the speaker, one person the listener, and one person the observer. They can talk about whatever they want and practice what they have learnt about listening and building trust.

Groups come together and share their experiences. One listener is asked to narrate what she heard, but her story does not correspond with what the speaker said! A listener in another group captured the story well however. Observers say that overall the listeners were able to capture the issues well, were very warm and friendly towards the speakers.

Participants go back into groups and change roles; this is repeated until all participants have done three roles. After each session, participants talk about their experience.

This exercise was very helpful in opening up the participants. They were very interactive and talked easily to each other. They said the principles they learnt earlier helped them in the activity.

Activity: Active listening

Facilitator: Changing from the victim to the healer will make you stronger. But before being the helper we have to know how to help. Doctors and counsellors have not had the same experience as you, and therefore may not understand exactly how you feel. You are in a better capacity to help others who have had similar experiences.

To help, you have to listen more than talk. But it has to be active listening.

Participants are asked to give examples of what makes a good listener:

- Look into the eye.
- Responding sounds (yes, ah, etc).
- Look attentive and observant.
- Sitting 45 degrees from the speaker (face to face is threatening).
- Express emotion physically.
- No prejudice or discrimination.

Examples of a bad listener:

- Listener is distracted (ie. talking on the phone).
- Moving around a lot.
- Talking with others.
- Sleeping.
- Keeps looking at the watch.
- Listener is not ready to listen, thinking of his/her own problems. Does not give the speaker enough time.
- Health and body condition of listener is bad and influences their listening.

If you are too tired or exhausted to listen, ask to go to the washroom. Take a break if you have been listening for a long time. Use a soft, smooth voice. Once you have learned these techniques you will be better than me in helping each other!

Trauma

Participants are asked to list reactions associated with experiencing trauma:

- Shock
- Denial
- Anger
- Crying
- Screaming
- Nervousness
- Feeling lost
- Insomnia
- Fear

Facilitator: These are all normal reactions to abnormal situations. Let them be. If you had no feelings, that would be abnormal. If symptoms linger on for a long time (more than two months) however, then you need medical attention. You might be depressed and feel like hurting yourself. You might even feel like you want to die. You may also feel disassociated; the brain does not connect with the present or your thoughts and emotions are disconnected.

Manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder:

Re-experience: Experiencing the same thing over and over without it actually happening; nightmares.

Avoidance: You shut yourself off from society; do not want to think of the future; do not want to associate with anybody; suffer from depression. You choose not to remember because you don't want it to hurt. You shut it out of your brain. This is especially prominent in children. It requires special techniques to find out what happened.

If these symptoms happen once in a while, it is fine. If they are regular or ongoing and interfere in your daily life, then they are problematic and require medical attention.

Activity: I have, I am, I can

This activity is to show the participants that they are resilient people able to cope with trauma effectively, and be in control of their life. In addition, it is meant to increase positive thinking: "I can do everything, I have the ability and capacity because I did before."

I have: helpers, lovers, friends, support groups and Allah

I am: a good person, nice, confident, faithful, emotionally strong, successful

I can: manage difficult situations, do things by myself, manage life properly

Participants draw a picture showing these aspects of their life.

Everyone explains their picture. Facilitator guides people's responses to show their resilience. Participants can see how they are demonstrating responsibility and care for someone who needs it, whether they are sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. All participants are effectively taking care of another person they love very much.

Activity: Reef and seaweed

Facilitator: Close your eyes. Imagine you are a seaweed and there are very strong currents, moving left and right. The wind stops. Open your eyes. Did anyone collapse? No. Why? Because you went along with the current.

Now close your eyes and imagine you are a reef. There is a strong wind. Although the reef is strong, it can collapse because it does not adjust to outside currents or influences.

You should try to live like seaweed, allowing you to sway or bend or nearly collapse when exposed to trauma, but you can become upright and powerful again when the currents or traumatic events pass. Your reactions are normal. Let the emotions out.

When you are facing trauma, you must show your emotions. If you never show any emotions, after a while you will collapse.

Activity: Stress release techniques

Participants are asked to list various symptoms of stress:

- Loss of appetite
- Shortness of breath
- Insomnia
- Fast heart beats

Facilitator: There are several techniques to release stress and relax. It is important to be relaxed when you want to help others. Also, you might feel stressed after helping others. One way to relax is through deep breathing, which is very important in calming yourself down.

Participants taught to pay attention to the rhythm of their breathing and to regulate it.

Participants go through a series of muscle relaxation for every part of the body – hands, arms, shoulders, head, legs, toes.

Activity: Role play

Facilitators choose two volunteers beforehand to demonstrate a one-on-one counselling session of 20 minutes each. The first role play involves a student who is anxious for her school exams. In the second situation a woman is supposed to marry someone she doesn't know. The sessions are conducted in a professional manner from beginning to end. Participants are observing. Each role play follows an assessment where participants can raise any issues and questions they have. They are also asked to identify what they have learned in the past two days and how that was applied in the role play.

All participants are then paired up to practice what they have learned. In turns, they each take on the role of victim and healer and practice with each other, giving each other feedback. All participants enjoyed the exercise.

Questions For Discussion

1. Discuss how trauma affects individuals and their daily lives.
2. Have you attended/organized any counselling or rehabilitation workshops? What did you learn?
3. Identify several groups of persons in your community who would benefit from such workshops. What are the resources/assistance already available to these groups and how could you improve them?

Lesson 2

This lesson discusses the importance of victims and the power of their voices in campaigning for change.

A. Victim power

The most important element of human rights work is promoting the dignity of all people. The actions of human rights activists must revolve around this concept. However, in many cases, victims of rights abuses are denied the dignity by those people who claim to defend the rights of the victims. Rather than seeing them as victims of a specific violation, they are seen as victims in general, with all the negative connotations that are associated with the term “victim”. This doubly victimises these individuals...

Pae Eun Shin, a South Korean mother who lost her son in the student democracy movement in Seoul in June 1987, is an advocate for [human rights and equality]. An uneducated woman who had never thought about democracy before her son's death, Pae sought to fight with others who had suffered similar losses as well as those who strived for more democracy in South Korea.

"I wanted to know why my son joined the demonstration," Pae said in a testimony. "Whenever I visited his grave, I would meet people who would tell me that my son was great and his death was a very sad thing for all of us. These kinds of feelings and sentiments encouraged me to also fight for democracy. Whenever I attended demonstrations and I saw the way the police treated students like animals, I never thought that they were not my sons. They were also my sons. So I had to continue the fight. I used to run after the police vans in which they took the students, and I would stand outside the police station and tell the police not to mistreat the students."

Pae will always grieve for the loss of her son. However, she has overcome her victimisation through her quest for democracy and in fighting for the dignity of other student protesters, who are also "her sons". In her quest she was helped and supported by other victims' family members, students and activists. Pae wants justice not only for her son, but for everyone...

While it is true that not all victims will choose Pae's path, most victims of human rights violations are in fact not weak, apathetic and in need of coddling. The abuse that they have suffered may leave them with specific needs (medical, legal or otherwise), but there are many whose experiences as victims of human rights violations will move them to fight for redress. In the case of Pae, no redress could bring her son back; she is fighting for her son's dignity in death and the cause of justice. Human rights activists need to support all victims not only to seek redress and thereby regain their dignity, but also to articulate their views of a society they wish to live in...

To respond to the needs of a victim requires three things: to know the violation, to provide for the immediate needs of the victim and to document their stories. All three are interlinked. To know the violation, it is essential for activists to meet the victims themselves, rather than rely on second-hand reports. Knowing the violation also means understanding the needs of the victims. These needs, whether medical, legal or otherwise, must be seen as a priority, ensuring the well-being of the victims...

To respond to systemic factors within society that allow the violations to occur requires the initiation of social or legal movements for change. Such movements, particularly if they are to create enough impact to be effective, need a coherent, organised civil society. Human rights activists must realise that victims themselves are a part of society and must be embraced within any such movement. In fact, the victims can be the strongest force leading a movement for change, as they are the ones most affected.

In the cases of the 1980 [G]wangju uprising and South Korea's struggle for democracy, activist Kim Yang Rae said that

neither movement would have been successful or even possible without the voice of the victims and their families. Kim said at times when everyone else wanted to give up it was the families of victims who persisted. The courage and determination of the ordinary people--which is largely overlooked by many human rights groups--should be harnessed as the driving force of movements for change. The human rights movement sometimes strangely forgets that human rights are about people, and without the people, no fight or discourse has any concrete reality.

“People”, of course, do not mean only the victims of human rights violations, but in the sense of all ordinary folk. It is their involvement that will create a movement with enough impact for change...

Victims of human rights violations are usually from the poorer sector of society, to which few human rights groups belong. Consequently, the human rights movement is increasingly seen as a foreign and elitist movement, distanced from those it is seeking to protect. The ideological gap between the groups and the people in many instances results in human rights groups not being interested in dealing with ordinary people, including victims. Activists forget that the very nature of human rights work is to deal with all humans [Meryam Dabhoiwala, ‘A reflection of human rights work: Human dignity of victims is our prime concern’, *Human Rights SOLIDARITY*, vol. 14, no. 6, November 2004].

The rehabilitation of victims intrinsically involves providing for the immediate needs of individuals, as well as longer term needs, to enable these persons to move on with their lives. In Sri Lanka for instance, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) was involved in establishing the Home for Victims of Torture, which provides housing, education, employment and counselling as required for those who have suffered rape or torture. In this way, individuals are given the necessary assistance with which they can overcome the abuse and continue with their lives. The network of groups and individuals involved in this endeavour also provide counselling training for human rights activists, so they are in a better position to assist victims.

Some victims may decide to speak out regarding their abuse and the system that allows such abuse to occur. The case study below of Angkhana Neelaphajit, Suciwati Munir and Padma Perera is indicative of the strength possessed by victims of human rights violations, as well as their importance to the causes they represent.

B. Three outstanding widows nominated for 2006 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights

On 30 March 2006, the AHRC nominated three outstanding widows of human rights defenders to jointly receive the prestigious 2006 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, awarded by the May 18 Memorial Foundation, Korea. The three were: Angkhana Neelaphajit, wife of disappeared Thai human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit; Suciwati Munir, wife of murdered Indonesian human rights lawyer Munir Said Thalib; and Padma Perera, wife of murdered Sri Lankan human rights activist Gerald Perera. All three exceptional women are close to the heart of the AHRC, and represent the true spirit of the Gwangju May 18 Uprising of 1980, which the prize

celebrates. All three stand for common values and actions; all three are equally deserving of respect and recognition.

In a statement announcing the nomination, the AHRC explained why the three women and their husbands are so important:

The murder of each human rights defender is the attempted murder of a human rights movement. It is also an attack on the whole of society. The aim is to create and intensify fear. Where fear exists, there are more opportunities for further killings, and fewer opportunities for redress. This is a method aimed at silencing not only one person but silencing everyone.

Today this intense fear smothers many parts of Asia. It has been created by a history of repression, and a trail of killings. Intimidation and cruelty are the fare of ordinary people's lives. Our human rights defenders daily confront and overcome this fear, intimidation and cruelty. The May 18 Uprising, together with the subsequent struggle of the Korean people for justice and redress, has become an important and enduring part of this fight against fear and intimidation in Asia.

The global human rights movement has an obligation to support and protect these human rights defenders. One very important way to do this is to celebrate the memory of those who have been killed because of their work, and to assist their families and colleagues to bring the perpetrators to justice and prevent the killings from continuing. This should not be confused with simple expressions of sentimentality and regret over their deaths. It is rather about protecting and nurturing a healthy, living society that can overcome the fear left in the wake of such deaths, and intensifying demands for a new society built on human rights and the rule of law. The people of Gwangju have understood this principle in the rebuilding of their society after the dictatorship was toppled and darkness lifted, through constant commemorations of the struggle for human rights and democracy.

The most important part of this work, as is made clear every May 18 in Gwangju, is the work with the families of the victims. When a human rights defender is killed, their spouse, children, parents and other close relatives come under intense pressure. They are the key to the strategy. After the target is dead, the wife, the son, the mother are the ones who are left behind. The message to society is obvious: "You and your family will end up like this if you dare to do what this person did." The family becomes the living exhibit of the perpetrators' ruthlessness...

Very often, as happened in Korea, it is the wife or husband of the dead person who becomes the most outspoken advocate of the dead person. In this way, she or he also becomes the next primary target for threats. All three of the joint nominees for the 2006 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights have risked their own lives to carry on with the work begun by their husbands. It is important for the perpetrators of these killings that their spouses also are silenced. If they become more vocal, then the objective of the killing cannot be achieved. The threat to the perpetrators may also become greater.

When voices of protest come from the wives or husbands of the dead, lost voices attain an even more vibrant expression. Society is obliged to respond and protect these persons and their voices. This obligation is owed both to the families of the

victims and to the society itself. The only way that society can regain its dignity is through this response and support...

All three of these joint nominees for the 2006 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights symbolise the struggle against intolerable cruelty and deep repression in Asia that embodies the spirit of the May 18 Uprising. Together they are the highest embodiment of human rights defence in Asia. By honouring them, we recognise not only their determination to protect human rights, but also our obligation to do the same. By honouring them, we acknowledge that this is a lasting obligation, and a commitment that we cannot allow to be forgotten. By honouring them as one, we give recognition to the commonality of their struggle and give rise to genuine solidarity for that struggle into the future, across the region [AHRC, 'ASIA: Three outstanding Asian widows jointly nominated for 2006 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights', AS-055-2006, 30 March 2006].

Angkhana Neelaphajit is the wife of Thai human rights lawyer Somchai Neelaphajit, who was abducted by the police on 12 March 2004. At the time, Somchai was defending clients who had accused the police of torture. His body has never been found.

Angkhana has been at the forefront of the campaign to get justice for his disappearance. In January 2006, one police officer was sentenced to three years in jail, but his accomplices and the masterminds of the crime have never been identified. She has received death threats because of her continued work. She has met UN officials both in Thailand and abroad to pursue the case. On International Women's Day 2006 she was given an award by the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand as an "outstanding woman human rights defender". On 11 March 2006 she received the 2nd Asian Human Rights Defender Award of the AHRC on behalf of her husband, which was also given in recognition of her own work since his disappearance two years ago. Angkhana is now an inspiration to large numbers of people in Thailand, as well as internationally. She is supported in her work by her five children.

The AHRC received the following endorsements for her nomination:

Vitit Muntarbhorn, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, said that Angkhana Neelaphajit had shown "great integrity" in her personal struggle for justice and had become "a leading human rights defender in Thailand".

"She is a wonderful inspiration to those who love human rights and she exemplifies the much welcome role that several women play in Asia in the pursuit of human rights and justice," Vitit said.

"She has risked her life continually to fight injustices" and uphold the rule of law, he said.

Sunee Chaiyarose, a commissioner of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, said that Angkhana had become an "outstanding figure" in the fight for human rights, despite serious intimidation.

“With her soft and calm but strong personality, she fights by the way of non-violence without losing heart or giving up,” Sunee said.

Sunee remarked on Angkhana’s straight-talking challenges on the failures of the authorities, even when speaking directly with the prime minister.

She said that Angkhana has overcome her own grief with the loss of her husband for the last two years to become a symbol of courage and perseverance for others, especially victims of disappearances in the south of Thailand.

Senator Sak Khosangruang described Angkhana as a woman of “strong spirit” who did not yield to threats and who was continuing to uphold the ideals of her husband, a human rights lawyer.

Sak said that her commitment to human rights was “exemplary and commendable”.

“She is an inspirational example for the people of Thailand as well as the people of neighbouring countries under oppression and violation of human rights,” he said.

Professor Mark Tamthai, director of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture at Payap University in Chiang Mai, agreed that Angkhana had been unrelenting in her pursuit of justice, and had inspired others to join the struggle.

“She has carried out this campaign with determination and inner strength while being threatened and harassed by power, and in so doing has become an inspiration to many in Thai society to follow her example and join in the struggle against injustices in society,” he said [AHRC, ‘Asia: Three widows should get award, rights defenders say’, AHRC-PL-032-2006, 25 April 2006].

Padma Perera is the wife of Gerald Perera, who was tortured almost to death by the Sri Lankan police in a case of mistaken identity on 3 June 2002. Gerald’s life was on that occasion saved only by the quick and determined intervention of his wife. It was also through Padma’s contact with a local human rights group that her husband’s case soon became a subject for advocacy.

As she helped him back to health, Gerald and Padma became staunch human rights defenders themselves. They refused to back down in their determination to have the torturers prosecuted, despite many attempts to coerce and threaten them. Gerald won a case for damages and was due to give evidence in a criminal case against the police officers who had tortured him when on 21 November 2004 he was shot dead.

Despite very real threats to her and her two young sons and daughter, like Angkhana and Suciwati, Padma stood up and refused to be intimidated. She took an active role in the campaign to have the killers arrested. Five

police and an accomplice were charged within a month. Padma went to court and testified against them without a trace of fear, and with enormous dignity. Since then she has become a symbol of resistance to police violence and oppression in Sri Lanka, especially among the victims of torture and their families. Like her counterparts in Indonesia and Thailand, she represented her husband's case before senior officials. In December 2005 she was a lead figure in human rights day celebrations organized by a local organization.

Father Reid Shelton, convenor of the Sri Lankan group People Against Torture, said that Padma Perera was “a beacon of hope” to victims of human rights violations there.

“The loss of her husband... has driven her to continue with her struggle for justice for her husband as well as for all the other victims,” Reid said.

“The moral support... from such a symbolic gesture is immense,” he said.

He encouraged the selection committee to give the award to the three widows while assuring that it would “be a source of courage to the victims” while asserting to the perpetrators that demands for justice would continue.

Samith de Silva, a former judge with the high court in Sri Lanka and with the UN Special Court for Serious Crimes in East Timor, said that Padma had given “strength to all Sri Lankan women who fight against human rights violations”.

He assured the selection committee that awarding the three widows with the Gwangju Human Rights Prize would be a “great inspiration” [AHRC, ‘Asia: Three widows should get award, rights defenders say’].

Suciwati Munir is a labour union leader and wife of Indonesian human rights lawyer Munir Said Thalib, who was poisoned on a Garuda airline flight to Amsterdam on 6 September 2004. Munir was at the centre of his country's human rights movement, and had made many powerful enemies. He died before reaching Europe, where an autopsy confirmed that he was murdered, apparently by a high-level conspiracy involving the national intelligence agency and staff of the airline.

Throughout the days and months that followed, Suciwati was at the forefront of the struggle for justice, both inside and outside Indonesia's malfunctioning investigative and judicial system. In December 2005 a pilot was sentenced to 14 years in jail for his murder, but Suciwati continues the struggle to have the whole truth about her husband's death revealed. She is now opening a civil complaint in the courts against Garuda. She has travelled both nationally and internationally to raise Munir's case, including to Geneva and countries throughout