

Editorial

Student vanguardism in UN human rights intervention

By Perfecto `Boyet` Caparas

THEY propel this law school's human rights initiatives forward.

With nary any financial resources to back them up, nor well-defined institutional systems and processes to encourage, guide, and support their efforts right from its very inception, Juris Doctor and Master of Laws candidates independently conceptualized and pressed on with their United Nations shadow and alternative reporting projects on Australia and Chad. They received inspiration from their student predecessors who similarly conceptualized and embarked on shadow reporting projects on Chile, Zambia, USA, and Panama.

During spring break, some of them went to the UN New York Headquarters and presented their remarkably gender-based reports to the Human Rights Committee during its 95th sessions from March 16 to April 3.

These students had the distinct privilege of listening in person and even interacting with international human rights luminaries like Mr. PN Bhagwati (India), Sir Nigel Rodley (United Kingdom), and Mr. Michael O'Flaherty (Ireland). This 18-member body monitors and oversees states parties' compliance with and implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that binds 164 states parties.

Students also privately met and briefed articulate and staunch human rights defenders of the Committee, such as Ms. Zonke Zanele Majodina (South Africa) and Ms. Ruth Wedgwood (United States), to name a few, about Chadian women's human rights issues.

Students presented to these independent experts their key facts and recommendations concerning female genital mutilation that has been maiming and dehumanizing women and girls in Chad as well as members of certain migrant communities in Australia.

Students also gathered and presented facts concerning child marriages, domestic violence, and political disempowerment of Chadian women. They likewise partnered with a Chadian rights violations victim who went with them and gave to the Committee's Task Force on Chad his personal accounts of these egregious human rights violations that have been omitted or not mentioned prominently in the Chadian government's periodic report.

As soon-to-be or international lawyers, students aspire higher than obtaining merely pedagogical value out of their direct exposure to the actual workings of the UN human rights monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. More importantly, students are proactively and strategically intervening in this process in order to help close the gap between ICCPR and reality. The ultimate goal they aim to accomplish is to strengthen human rights protection at the grassroots level. They therefore fulfill the mandate and exercise their basic human rights enshrined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The lack of a clearly defined policy and institutional mechanism on shadow reporting recently prompted a student to ask: "What is our role as students in UN shadow reporting?" The answer: "You are the human rights dynamo."