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Key witness in Palawan broadcaster's slay arrested

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Posted date: November 28, 2007

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY -- A key witness in the trial of a former policeman for the 2006 murder of Palawan broadcaster Fernando "Dong" Batul was barred by the presiding judge from testifying on Wednesday and had him arrested instead for an allegedly trumped-up charge.

Palawan Regional Trial Court Judge Toribio Ilao Jr. ordered the arrest of Ferdinand Bayles after the latter was presented by the prosecution as a key witness, on the strength of an arrest warrant issued against Bayles for illegal gambling.

Prosecution lawyers and the family of Batul decried Ilao's handling of the trial, accusing the latter of "obvious bias" by not allowing a key witness in an important murder case to testify.

Bayles, according to prosecution counsel Joselito Alisuag, was to testify that he actually witnessed the accused gunman, Aaron Golifardo, in the act of shooting the victim in the early morning of May 22, 2006, while the victim was driving to his radio station.

Ilao repeatedly denied the prosecution's plea to allow Bayles to testify and instead directly ordered the police to arrest Bayles, triggering indignation from the family and supporters of Batul present during the hearing.

"Napakagarapal naman ng desisyon na ginawa ni Judge Ilao. [What Judge Ilao did was brazen.] He should have at least allowed Bayles to testify before having him arrested on a case that is totally unrelated and even trumped up," Letty Batul, a sister of the victim, told the Philippine Daily Inquirer, parent company of INQUIRER.net.

Asked by the Inquirer to comment if preventing Bayles from testifying was a valid order, Alisuag said they would continue to question Ilao's decision as "highly irregular."

"Where is the justice that we are pursuing? Pity us. We are the ones who have lost a loved one. Up to now we are still the victim," Batul said in Filipino.

Batul claimed that the charge of illegal gambling against Bayles was trumped up.

"He (Bayles) went back to the Visayas after the killing and we are surprised that he is now being implicated in organizing a silly cockfighting game. It's obviously a trumped-up charge to derail his testimony and to deny us justice," Batul said.

A hard-hitting commentator of local radio station dyPR, Batul had earned the ire of local politicians in his primetime "Bastonero" program before his murder.

Witnesses have pointed to Golifardo, a former city policeman, as one of the two motorcycle-riding assailants who ambushed Batul while the latter was driving a jeep going to his station.

Supporters of Batul have criticized the investigation of the case due to the failure to pinpoint the mastermind behind the killing.

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