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Churches reject robbery theory in death of Dutch man in the Philippines

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NCR Today

MANILA, Philippines -- Christian church leaders and colleagues of Dutch nongovernmental organization worker Wilhelm Geertman, 67, reject the theory of robbery as motive for his shooting death in front of his office Tuesday as he reportedly returned from withdrawing money from the bank in the northern Philippines.

Angeles City police said Geertman, whose full name is Wilhelmus JJ Lutz Geertman, was shot in the left side of his chest. Initial reports said the shooter and his companion fled the scene with the 1.2 million pesos (\$27,900) Geertman withdrew from the bank.

San Fernando Auxiliary Bishop Pablo David, citing a report from Angeles City's police chief, told *NCR* the shooting took place at 12:40 p.m. in front of the offices of Alay Bayan-Luson Inc. in San Fernando City, but police from nearby Angeles City responded quickest to the emergency calls.

Geertman was executive director of Alay Bayan-Luson Inc., a nonprofit organization. The group aids farmers and conducts relief missions in Nueva Ecija and Aurora provinces in the northern Philippines after a devastating typhoon in September.

Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo, chairman of the Philippines bishops' National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace, said in an interview with Church radio Veritas 846 on Wednesday that Geertman helped NASSA in its campaign against the Aurora Pacific Economic Zone and Freeport project to develop vast tracks of agricultural land into commercial and industrial facilities.

Pabillo said he counts the killing among human rights violations in the country and challenged President

Benigno Aquino III to act on escalating cases of violations.

Lawyer Jobert Pahilga of Hacienda Luisita farmer workers' alliance, speaking separately to radio Veritas, said he also believed Geertman was killed because of his involvement in the cause of farmers on Luzon Island in the northern Philippines.

"The police theory of a possible robbery case seems unbelievable because there were so many things they could have taken from the office but they did not," Pahilga said.

However, a spokesperson for Alay Bayan-Luson Inc. said Geertman could not have been killed because of the land dispute in the sugar hacienda, owned by relatives of Aquino and ordered by the court for distribution to thousands of farmers, because Geertman had not been to the Tarlac estate.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines, an alliance of mainline Protestant Churches in the country, denounced Geertman's killing and lamented the loss of a missionary who dedicated his life to helping Filipino farmers and victims of disasters.

The council's statement recalled the "assassination" of its own church's Bishop Most Rev. Alberto Ramento in Tarlac in 2006.

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"We decry the failure of the government to arrest and prosecute perpetrators of this wanton taking of human lives," the statement says.

Pahilga said continued and brazen killings show how ineffective the government is in protecting rights and well-being of those who fight for human rights, protection of the environment and other issues.

"We haven't even resolved the killing of Italian Fr. Fausto Tentorio and another foreign missionary is killed," he said.

Tentorio, a priest of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, was shot to death by motorcycle-riding gunmen in October in Arakan, North Cotabato. The staunch opponent of mining and advocate for rights of indigenous people was the first European missionary slain under Aquino's term as president.

Pahilga said the government needs to exert greater effort and the National Bureau of Investigation must go after the mastermind.

"The way we see it, more lives will be sacrificed if people of authority, like retired Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan, are not captured and tried," he said. The leader of government's counterinsurgency campaign went into hiding in December after a regional court ordered his arrest to face charges of two counts of kidnapping and serious illegal detention in connection with the kidnapping of university students.

Geertman was killed just a week after the New York-based Human Rights Watch urged the Aquino government to act on human rights abuses and hold authorities accountable for the killing and harassment of activists.

The government has not prosecuted any case of extrajudicial killing or enforced disappearance, Human Rights Watch noted.

Roman Polintan, chairman of the left-wing political coalition Bagong Alyansang Makabayan in Central Luzon, said he also suspects Geertman's killing was politically motivated because the Dutchman spoke out against the "culture of impunity" in the country and opposed mining.

Army spokesman Maj. Harold Cabunoc denied Wednesday any military hand in Geertman's death and challenged accusers to show evidence of extra-judicial killing so the culprit can be prosecuted. Presidential spokesman Edwin Lacierda said the Dutch worker's killing had no connection with his aid to Hacienda Luisita farmers and that a task force has been formed to look into the death.

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