

UNDER FIRE

Environmental attorneys
face attacks

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN



ALFRED LAHAI BROWNELL

THEY SAID THEY WANTED TO CUT OFF HIS HEAD AND TEAR HIS HEART OUT OF HIS CHEST.

The car Alfred Lahai Brownell was traveling in was stopped by a roadblock and surrounded by 150 men wielding guns and machetes, “all kinds of weapons,” Brownell remembers. The men were members of a security force allegedly hired by palm oil company Golden Veroleum Liberia. They were drunk, had lit a fire and were dancing around the vehicle, breaking into it and slashing its tires.

“I prayed to God,” Brownell says, reliving the nightmare that occurred in his native Liberia in 2014.

Brownell and about 100 other attorneys and environmental advocates who are partners of the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW) came to Eugene for the nonprofit’s annual meeting shortly before this week’s University of Oregon’s March 2-5 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference (PIELC).

This year, ELAW communications director Maggie Keenan says a key focus of the gathering is “defending the defenders.”

While the group has always supported its international array of attorneys, scientists and advocates, Keenan says there has been an uptick in attacks on ELAW partners around the world, and ELAW is working to improve the personal, digital and organizational security of its grassroots environmental lawyers.

From Africa to Mexico to the Philippines, ELAW and other environmental attorneys have been assaulted, arrested and murdered.

One positive aspect, if one can call it that, to the rising attacks is that they are a sign that the environmental lawyers and the people they represent in their native countries — often indigenous communities — are winning, according to Sara Holden, a risk and security management advisor who worked with ELAW partners during their Eugene meeting.

“If they were not afraid then there’s no reason to act against you,” Holden says. “They would not waste energy or time or risk exposing themselves.”

The “they” Holden speaks of is primarily massive corporations exploiting the environment and native communities for corporate gain, often in conjunction with corrupt government officials.

“It’s a tragic and bizarre assessment of your effectiveness,” Holden says.

Grizelda “Gerthie” Mayo-Anda, executive director of the Environmental Legal Assistance Center in the Philippines, has been working with ELAW for 10 years. On Feb. 15, a week before Mayo-Anda traveled to Eugene, her co-worker, attorney Mia Manuelita Cumba Masacariñas-Green was shot to death in front of her three children.

She was killed in connection with a private case, Mayo-Anda says of the volunteer attorney who was ambushed by two men on motorcycles as she was driving her children home. Masacariñas-Green was a feisty, passionate lawyer, Mayo-Anda says, who worked on not just environmental and land issues but on women’s and children’s rights.

According to Greenpeace, nearly 100 environmental activists have been killed in the Philippines since 2010.

Brownell has been working with ELAW since the early 2000s. He formed the nonprofit group Green Advocates while still in law school as a response to then-Liberian president Charles Taylor’s exploitation of the West African country’s land and resources. Brownell later helped put into place Liberia’s first framework environmental law.

After 14 years of civil war in which Brownell says more than 300,000 Liberians were killed, Brownell and others saw Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, elected president in 2005, as a beacon of hope. But Brownell says Sirleaf, a Noble Prize laureate, soon began to roll back environmental protections.

Brownell and Green Advocates took on the case of an indigenous community in the Butaw district of Liberia. Thousands of acres of land were being destroyed for oil palm cultivation through concessions — lands conceded by the government to corporations to use, often without, Brownell says, the consent of the villagers.