



[OPINION] The Price of Life

In the Philippines, the latest smartphone costs more than a hitman's fee.



Michael Raqim Mira

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"Don't buy pigs for your farm. Get cows. They're easier to maintain, costs less to feed if they're free-range," the tricycle driver told me before taking a drag from his cigarette. "And they have a higher return on investment when you sell its meat."

We were stuck in traffic. A "skylab"--a habal-habal modified into a dangerous circus act--collided with a pickup truck a hundred yards ahead of us. Two dead. It was evening rush hour and the ambulance had just barely arrived on the scene. My tricycle driver, Fredo, turned off his engine and leaned back. Since we were waiting in purgatory, I decided to tell him about my aspirations of becoming a farmer. It turned out that he had been raising livestock for the past 20 years, so he gave me advice.

Do you know how much it costs to purchase a healthy heifer? Around PHP 50,000. If you want to purchase a bull for breeding, the price is even higher.

Three months later, I was interviewing a contract killer. For his privacy, he will be referred to as Johnny. I asked Johnny how much he charges his clients. He replied, "Depends on how rich the client is, but I mostly get paid less than PHP 40,000."

He explained that the price range also depends on how easy it is to reach his target. If the person he was paid to kill lives in a gated subdivision, that means Johnny has to wait outside of the compound until the person comes out, and that could be hours wasted.

With four children--two in elementary, one starting high school and a daughter about to enter college--and a dead wife, time is money. Any time wasted on being idle means he is losing daylight that could be spent on doing other work, such as construction, which is what he does when opportunities are available.

Despite being a journalist and not a psychologist, I asked him how he dealt with emotions when he watched his victim's head explode as hollow-point ammunition cracked the cranium. He didn't hesitate to answer. "If their death means my kids stay alive, then I just try to sleep it off at night."

We sat by the large window inside a Jollibee. He chose one right next to a major highway because it allows him to get away quickly if cops or enemies try to nab him. His words mixed with the laughter of children and fake enthusiasm of cashiers welcoming new customers who entered.

Johnny told me that he was raised by devout Catholic grandparents in the province. When he has time, he would go to the local chapel to pray. Johnny preferred to pray on the weekdays because there are less people. He said the privacy with God was more intimate.



In the Philippines, you can hire gang members, [even ex-NPA militants](#), and any person desperate for money to kill anyone you don't like. This outlaw environment has added fuel to the fire of the drug war. This free-for-all culture has allowed contract killers to move with ease.

Although there are plenty of potential clients, Johnny also has a lot of competition in the market. Even foreign hitmen have joined the growing murder-for-hire business in the Philippines. In 2013, three former-U.S. Army soldiers were arrested in Thailand for the execution-style murder of a Philippine national. The contract killers were paid by Paul Le Roux--an international drug and arms trafficker based in Zimbabwe--to kill real estate agent Catherine Lee, who Le Roux suspected of cheating him in a land deal. One of the killers, a former sniper in the U.S. special forces, shot Lee twice in the face as she sat in the backseat of a van.

In a country that's notorious for extrajudicial killings--[where even priests aren't immune to the kiss of a bullet](#)--and is considered one of the most dangerous workplaces for journalists, I couldn't part ways with Johnny without asking him about these statistics. He told me that "a job is a job" and that it doesn't matter who he's paid to kill. I jokingly asked him if he would kill me if he was paid to do so. He laughed and replied, "You bought me a meal and you're a nice person. That counts for a lot, so I might give you a headstart."

His words summed up the dynamics between the killers and the victims: poverty has driven people to go against each other. It's not personal and I could not find it in me to fault him for what he does. Before he said farewell and rode off into the dark highway, he thanked me for simply listening to him.

"Sana wag mong isipin na masamang tao ako (I hope you don't think I'm a bad person)," Johnny said to me.

The truth is--whether he is judged as a good or bad person by God, the court or the public--there is someone far more evil above him, like the corrupt politicians or businessmen who pay him to kill innocent people because eliminating competition is the surest way to win.

The price of life in the Philippines is less than that of a cow at the cattle auction, but in a society that is becoming increasingly depraved, we are all headed to the slaughterhouse.