

Roadside killing of a 15-year-old: As Trump arrives in Manila, a young victim of Duterte's devastating 'drug war' is mourned

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MANILA — The funeral is packed with children. There are children praying. Children playing peekaboo. Children peering through the glass-topped casket at their friend.

There lies Mark Salonga, the wisecracking oldest of four children, one of 16 cousins living under one tin roof. Mark, 15, was fatally shot by men on motorbike on the night of Nov. 3, leaving behind his family, a baseball cap and his school ID.

In the year and a half since President Rodrigo Duterte took office on a promise to kill suspected drug users and dealers, thousands of Filipinos, including dozens of children and teenagers, have been killed, either shot in police raids with high-death tolls and few witnesses, or targeted by hit men, often after being named by police.

The scope of the violence is such that the roadside killing of a 15-year-old is not big news. On Sunday afternoon, as Mark's family and friends walked from church to cemetery, there were no television cameras. The press was focused, instead, on the arrival of President Trump.

[Trump meets Philippines leader Duterte for the first time]

Mark lived in a Manila that Trump won't see. The U.S. president landed at the airport, took a helicopter to the roof of a conference center and then drove through closed streets to a luxury hotel.

Over the next two days, he will attend closed-door meetings, including a talk with Duterte. They are expected to discuss North Korea's nuclear program, terrorism, the South China Sea and other issues. What remains to be seen is whether they will talk about the anti-drug campaign and the violent impunity it unleashed.

While President Barack Obama called out Duterte's rights record, Trump has steered clear of public comment. A leaked transcript of a phone call with Duterte, however, showed that he privately praised the effort, telling Duterte that he was doing an "unbelievable job on the drug problem."

U.S. lawmakers are calling on Trump to express concern, and the White House hinted that he just might. Duterte, meanwhile, has said that he is "sure" the U.S. president will not. "He's not the human rights commission," the Philippine leader said.

Mark's mother, Myra Salonga, 37, is not counting on Trump, or anyone, really. With no television or Internet, she did not know that the United States had a new president, or that the new president was coming to Manila on the day she buried her son.

Since the night Mark was shot, no officer has come to ask about the case, she said. Salonga said Mark started using drugs around 9, missed a few years of school, then cleaned up and went back to classes. She does not know why he was killed and does not think the police care enough to find out.

[Duterte's brutal drug war: Philippine mayor and more than a dozen others killed by police]

On the last night of her son's wake, she mulled the impossibility of paying nearly \$800 in funeral costs on an income of about \$2 to \$5 a day and worried that her surviving children, ages 12, 10 and 8, were becoming fixated on their fear of their brother's ghost.

Mark's friends, still baby-faced, did not know who were responsible or what to do. They honored their friend by making T-shirts. Some wore white shirts with the word "bessy," as in "bestie," or "best friend," in black. "That's what he called everyone," one friend said.

Others made shirts that read "Justice for Mark" on the back.

Few may remember, but they won't forget.

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Kimberly dela Cruz contributed to this report.

P.S.

* The Washington Post, November 12 at 11:52 AM:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/12/as-trump-arrives-in-manila-a-young-victim-of-dutertes-devastating-drug-war-is-mourned/?utm>

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