News



Fr. Flaviano "Flavie" Villanueva walks with funeral workers in protective suits as they carry the remains of a victim of an alleged extrajudicial killing under former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs" at a public cemetery in Manila, Philippines on Sept. 17, 2021, after it was exhumed due to an expired contract to rent the grave. (AP/Aaron Favila)

Jim Gomez

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Associated Press

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A Filipino priest, who publicly protested then-President Rodrigo Duterte's bloody crackdown against illegal drugs despite death threats and helped provide proper funerals to those killed, is among the winners of this year's Ramon Magsaysay Awards — Asia's version of the Nobel Prize.

The other winners announced Sunday were a non-profit foundation in India that worked to bring poor girls to schools in more than 30,000 villages across the South Asian country's most underserved regions and a local Maldives diver who sparked a movement to save her tropical island nation from plastic pollution with massive cleanups and recycling.

Named after a popular Philippine president, who died in a 1957 plane crash, they honor "greatness of spirit" through selfless service to people across Asia.

The winners will be presented with their awards at the Metropolitan Theatre in Manila on Nov. 7.

Fr. Flaviano Antonio Villanueva

The priest is a self-confessed drug user who recovered from addiction and was ordained a Catholic priest in 2006. He uses his transformation "to prove that even the most wayward and destitute can find redemption and renewal."

In 2015, Villanueva founded the Arnold Janssen Kalinga Center, which provides food, clothing and shelter to thousands in need in the Philippines, including those who may have engaged in drugs and petty crimes, so they may reclaim self-respect, according to the award foundation.

Thousands of mostly poor suspects were killed in Duterte's police-enforced crackdowns on illegal drugs. The reformed priest led efforts to locate their bodies and raised funds for proper cremation and burial. He also put up a memorial shrine for them to ease the plight of widows and orphans.

However, his activism led to accusations of sedition under Duterte, a charge that was dropped in 2023, "although the death threats never stopped," the foundation said.

"With deep compassion and quiet defiance, he created spaces to rebuild what were unjustly erased by healing the broken, leading home the abandoned and rekindling hope when it seemed all but lost," the foundation said.

Duterte's stormy six-year presidency ended in 2022. In March this year, the former president was arrested on a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for an alleged crime against humanity over the widespread killings of drug suspects. He has denied authorizing extrajudicial killings.

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The Educate Girls foundation

The winning Indian non-profit was established in 2007 by Safeena Husain, who returned home after graduating from the London School of Economics and working in the United States to help provide education for girls in rural India by harnessing government and community resources.

"Illiterate girls are forced to marry early, have children, and work — while culturally privileged males go to school," the award body said. "Given their limited horizons, only a lifetime of penury and servitude awaits most of these women."

Starting in the largest state of Rajasthan, where girls have the highest illiteracy rate, Educate Girls identified the most vulnerable communities, brought unschooled or out-of-school girls into the classroom until they were able to acquire credentials for higher education and employment. From 50 pilot village schools, more than 30,000 villages across India later benefitted from the program, involving over 2 million girls with a high retention rate, the foundation said.

"Educate Girls entered communities where girls and women were expected to stay in the shadows — and made them visible," the foundation said. "They challenged tradition, shifted mindsets and showed that education is not a privilege but a right that reshapes and rebuilds lives."

Shaahina Ali attempts to save her home from plastic

The third winner grew up in the Maldives and witnessed how the tropical Asian island country, popular among tourists, was threatened by plastic pollution on land and at

sea with rapid urbanization.

"As a diver, photojournalist and diving instructor, Ali often came literally face to face with the tides of trash clouding up the once-pristine waters of her islands, leaving behind swaths of dead fish and dying corals," the foundation said.

In 2015, Ali linked up with a non-government group to start an anti-pollution project and turn waste plastic into a resource for livelihood. Working with volunteers and businesses, her group, Parley Maldives, has undertaken massive cleanups and information and recycling campaigns "that have not only caught much of the physical waste but just as crucially intervened where it matters— in the minds of Maldivians and tourists who now recognize and avoid the problems plastic poses," it said.

Ali, 59, has worked with the government also to address climate change and "sparked a marine movement rooted in community, science and resolve."

"I go there to clean up with hope — hope that my grandchildren will see whales in the ocean in their lifetime as I did growing up," the foundation cited Ali as saying.