

Philippine military implicated in brutal murder of human rights activists

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Mounting evidence has emerged in the Philippine media that the military was directly involved in the brutal murder of two human rights activists—Eden Marcellana, secretary-general of Karapatan (Rights)-Southern Tagalog, and Eddie Gumanoy, a peasant leader—on April 21 on the island of Mindoro about 150 km southeast of the capital Manila.

Marcellana and Gumanoy were part of a 12-person fact-finding mission sent to investigate and document reported abuses in Gloria and surrounding towns allegedly committed by soldiers from the 204th Infantry Brigade under the command of Colonel Jovito Palparan. The two were abducted on April 21 along with three others—Virgilio Catoy II, Francisco Saez, and Marlvín Jocson—by armed men claiming to be right-wing vigilantes.

Marcellana was found dead the next day with two stab wounds and two gunshot wounds to her face. Gumanoy was found beside her with one gunshot wound in his chest and another to the back of his head. Catoy, Saez, and Jocson, who were separated from the other two, survived after being hog-tied and then abandoned. Eventually they managed to free themselves.

Karapatan and Bayan Muna (Nation First), a leftist political party, immediately blamed the killings on soldiers from the 204th brigade and accused Palparan of being the mastermind. The atrocity, they stated, was one of 33 cases of harassment, abduction, forced evacuation and murder against left-wing organisations in the area since last year.

On April 23, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo ordered the Department of Justice (DOJ) to conduct an independent investigation of the latest murders. Yet, despite signs of military involvement, she insisted on describing the killings as an “anti-communist vigilante abduction and murder” which, she declared, her administration would not countenance under the country’s democratic system.

But the vigilante story quickly began to unravel. On April 24, a high-level source within the DOJ leaked an initial report by a five-man investigative team to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Headed by DOJ undersecretary Jose Calida, Task Force Mindoro had, after an eight-hour investigation, found sufficient evidence to demonstrate that military personnel were involved.

Later that same day, Calida announced to a press briefing that witnesses had identified five suspects, three based on sketches. He also discounted claims that vigilante groups carried out the killings. Asked if he had recommended that Colonel Palparan be relieved of duty, he replied: “I believe the president has acted on

our recommendation, and until that is officially announced I will not make any comment.” The following day the colonel was “temporarily transferred” and the whole unit placed under formal inquiry.

In the first week of May, the three survivors, along with other witnesses, submitted sworn affidavits to congressional committees on human rights, declaring that the military unit was dangerously out of control. A Bayan Muna press release, which summarised the sworn affidavits, provided details of the events that led up to the killings.

The fact-finding mission had gone to the town of Gloria on April 19 to investigate the illegal arrest of three residents—Martin de la Serna, Gilberto Rabe and Rolando Sadiwa—by soldiers from the 204th Infantry Brigade led by Colonel Palparan himself. The military accused the three of being involved in a recent ambush by the New People’s Army (NPA) against the military and had detained them illegally at the brigade’s camp.

On April 20, the mission attempted to visit the three men but their request was immediately denied. Soldiers in the camp allegedly told the town officials, who were acting as intermediaries, that the brigade considered Marcellana “an enemy” and “a big fish of the National Democratic Front”. The National Democratic Front and the NPA, against which the military has waged a protracted war, are connected to the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

According to a *Philippine Daily Inquirer* report, the following day, armed men, claiming to be “Philippine soldiers” and “friendly forces conducting special operations,” arrived in town and beat up several town residents accusing them of being NPA sympathisers. Their vehicle broke down and so they had to call for assistance. A military jeep came to tow their vehicle known as a jeepney. It carried special forces markings. The victims of the beating filed complaints at the town hall and were introduced to the fact-finding mission.

The mission left town later on April 21, intending to head to Calapan city. On a major highway 5.5 kilometres from the brigade camp, their hired van was forced to a stop by armed men and a passenger jeepney parked across the highway. The men claimed to be members of a vigilante organisation but contradicted each other as to which one. The mission members, along with their van, were seized, driven off and taken to a spot where Marcellana and Gumanoy were separated from the rest. This was the last the survivors saw of the two.

Three weeks after the murders, the officer-in-charge of the 204th brigade finally issued a formal denial of any wrongdoing. According to the *Philippine Star*, Lieutenant Colonel Reynaldo Cabigao, acting adjutant, wrote a letter to DOJ official Calida declaring that his soldiers had not been involved in the beating up of the residents or the murders of Marcellana and Gumanoy.

Cabigao also denied that any military jeep from the unit had been used “to tow a passenger jeep.” On May 11, however, just prior to his letter, the DOJ investigative team found the passenger jeepney allegedly used in the abduction and murder of Marcellana and Gumanoy. It was parked inside the brigade headquarters and, according to the *Philippine Star*, was registered to the 68th Battalion.

Despite the mounting evidence, a month later the investigation has reached an impasse. Sources within the DOJ task force have told the media that it believes that the military is covering up for its soldiers. The army has refused to produce the prime suspects for questioning, a sergeant and three others, including a former rebel now working as a military intelligence agent.

The murders are not an isolated incident, nor simply the product of rogue officers or units. Arroyo came to power in early 2001 by ousting the democratically elected president Joseph Estrada with the backing of the military top brass, the judiciary and sections of big business. Various leftist organisations, including the CPP, backed Arroyo, a right-wing US-trained economist, as the “democratic” alternative to the Estrada administration and its alleged corrupt practices.

Since coming to power, Arroyo has allied herself closely with the Bush administration, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US. In a bid to gain US military and economic aid, she has attempted to prove her administration’s credentials in Washington’s “global war on terrorism” by giving the green light for US military involvement in counterinsurgency operations in southern Mindanao.

In the name of fighting terrorism, Arroyo has sharply curtailed democratic rights. Her administration has also abandoned negotiations with the NPA and launched a military offensive against the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). In this political atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that sections of the armed forces should feel emboldened to add to the military’s already long record of atrocities.

Early last year, Colonel Palparan brazenly told a press conference that Karapatan and Bayan Muna, among other organisations, were NPA fronts responsible for recruiting and training guerrillas in the Mindoro Island. He claimed that 60 percent of the NPA guerrillas who had surrendered over the previous year in his area had been introduced to the armed struggle by non-government organisations.

Palparan called for a crackdown even though the organisations he referred to are all legal. Bayan Muna is a political party that won over 3 percent of the vote in the last congressional elections and has three parliamentary representatives. A year later, 17 summary executions have taken place in the area—13 were either Bayan Muna members or officials. Palparan was promoted to Brigadier General, subject to congressional approval, despite a formal complaint against him over the murder of Bayan Muna

coordinator Edilberto Napoles.

Figures indicate that the level of human rights abuse is on the rise throughout the country. According to the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, a non-government organisation closely linked to the Philippine Catholic Church, as of December 2002 there had been at least 197 political detentions, 12 people have disappeared, eight summarily executed and 14,851 people forcibly evacuated during the military’s counter-insurgency campaigns.

Since the fall of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, there have been 6,913 cases of human rights violations according to the government’s Commission of Human Rights. In 1999 alone, there were 1,434 cases of civil rights violations. Only 556 of these cases have ever been brought to court; of which only 27 percent resulted in a prosecution. In the conduct of ordinary criminal proceedings, Amnesty International has documented cases of “unlawfully extended periods of ‘investigative’ detentions, before the filing of charges” where “suspects were subjected to torture or ill treatment by police or military personnel to extract confessions or information.”

The rising number of human rights violations signals a turn by the ruling elites in the Philippines to outright repression. As in neighbouring countries, the government has no answers to the growing social and political tensions produced by its economic policies or to the increasing signs of economic downturn.

As of 2002, 40 percent of the Philippine population of 76.5 million lived below the poverty line, 3.5 million people were without jobs and close to five million people were underemployed. According to the IMF, the richest 20 percent of the population earned or controlled 47.8 percent of the national income while the poorest 20 percent earned just 6.5 percent.

The minimum wage of 265.00 pesos, which has not increased for the past two years, is, in Metro Manila, calculated to be just over half of the daily cost of living—530.01 pesos—for a family of six. Even then, a Department of Labor survey of 8,161 firms found that 24.8 percent did not pay the minimum wage.

In these conditions, the role of the CPP and other left organisations is particularly dangerous. Having assisted Arroyo to power, they continue to promote the illusion that her administration can be pressured to rein in the military and defend democratic rights. In doing so, they assist in propping up a right-wing government that is increasingly turning to the security forces to intimidate and suppress any signs of political opposition.



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