

Outrage in the Philippines over killing of plantation workers

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The Philippine government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is facing a public outcry over violence meted out to farmers, plantation workers and their representatives in the ongoing labour dispute at the Hacienda Luisita Inc near Tarlac City. The plantation and associated sugar mill are owned and run by the Conjuangcos-Aquino family, relatives of former president Cory Aquino.

Feelings were further inflamed after the cold-blooded execution of Marcelino Beltran, the chairman of the farm workers organisation Alyansa ng mga Magbubukid ng Tarlac on December 8. Beltran was a key witness in a Senate and House inquiry into the killing of 12 workers and two small children in a military-police operation on November 26 to break up a blockade by 6,000 workers at the plantation's sugar mill.

Hundreds of workers were badly injured during the brutal attack. Scores of vehicles owned by the strikers, as well as foodstuffs and other personal belongings, were destroyed. The operation involved more than 1,000 police and military personnel backed by a bulldozer, two V-150 armored personnel carriers and water cannon mounted on four fire trucks.

Beltran, who was at the picket line on the day of the assault, was gunned down outside his home in the remote village of Barangay San Sotero by an assailant wearing an army uniform. The dying man told his wife that "soldiers did the shooting". As he was being taken to hospital in a tricycle, men in army fatigues stopped the vehicle and demanded to know if the wounded man was Beltran.

Six members of the House of Representatives have issued a statement condemning the murder. They described it as a "well-planned and well-executed" operation to silence Beltran, and declared the violence against workers and farmers "was the direct consequence of the obstinacy and continuing reign of the Cojuangcos" over the Hacienda Luisita.

It is not known if the order to kill Beltran came from the military top brass or if the government was involved in the assassination. However, it is clear that evidence presented to

the congressional inquiry and widely reported in the media was proving to be a political embarrassment.

In late November, a graphic video recording of the police-military assault was presented by United Luisita Workers' Union (ULWU) and the Central Azucarera De Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU)—the two unions involved in the dispute.

The video showed large numbers of police and military attacking the unarmed picketers with water cannon and teargas, and ramming an Armed Personnel Carrier (APC) into the barricades. Union spokesmen said that the water from the high-powered water cannons was laced with metal dust and chemicals.

Even more shocking, the video caught the dying moments of workers and their supporters who had been cut down by a hail of bullets. The dead and injured, drenched in blood, lay crumpled on the ground.

Evidence has also been presented that directly challenges the government and military claims that army personnel could not have been involved in the shootings as they were not carrying firearms. According to earlier official statements, the shots were fired from towers inside the plantation complex and surrounding fields.

Francisco Lintag, the sheriff sent by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) to enforce the order to restore operations at the sugar mill, said in a sworn statement to the National Bureau of Investigation that he had seen, "soldiers rushing toward the strikers while firing their firearms upward". Lintag said that, when the firing stopped, he saw people being carted off in ambulances to hospital.

Lintag's evidence confirming that soldiers discharged firearms was particularly damaging to the government's attempts to blame the shootings on guerrilla fighters from the New Peoples Army (NPA)—an accusation the NPA has strenuously denied.

Government and military spokesmen have also attempted to blame the workers for the violence claiming that they were armed and fired at the police and troops. No evidence has been provided to support the allegations which workers' representatives have denied.

Following the killings, President Arroyo has attempted to distance herself from the attack, posturing as neutral in the dispute. There is no doubt, however, that the government is directly responsible.

Arroyo's Labor Secretary Patricia Sto Tomas issued the "Assumption of Jurisdiction Order" that authorised the huge police-military operation against the blockade and the use of "full force". Tomas justified the decision to intervene by declaring "the national interest is clearly affected by the dispute".

The so-called national interest, however, coincided with the needs of the influential Cojuangco-Aquino family to end a costly and potentially politically damaging dispute at the Hacienda Luisita.

The CATLU, the union representing mill workers, is seeking a 100-peso (\$US1.79) increase in the daily wage. The ULWU, covering 5,000 plantation workers, is demanding the reinstatement of 327 farm workers dismissed in October, including the union president and vice president. The management has so far refused to negotiate on the reinstatements and has opposed the pay demand.

The plantation management, other major landowners and the government were particularly alarmed, however, at a demand for long-outstanding changes to the current law to ensure the redistribution of land to farm and plantation workers.

Members of the Cojuangco family purchased the sugar mill and the plantation in 1958 with funds supplied by the Central Bank of the Philippines and the Government Service Insurance System on the condition that the estate would be divided among tenants. Having acquired the funds, the family blocked any land redistribution by mounting legal challenges to court decisions awarding land to the tenants.

Former president Aquino came to power in 1986 on the wave of opposition to the Marcos dictatorship. She promised to redistribute land and implemented the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform program (CARP) to break up large sugar plantations such as Hacienda Luisita. But CARP contained a loophole known as the Stock Distribution Option (SDO) that allowed large landowners to evade actual land redistribution by classifying farm workers and tenants as stockholders or co-owners.

Studies by academics James Putzel and Saturnino Borrás Jr show that the Cojuangco family, for example, manipulated the SDO by "creating a number of spin-off corporations related to sugar-cane production, transportation, milling, and marketing".

Putzel and Borrás point out that only one of these newly created corporations, the Hacienda Luisita Inc (HLI), was subject to land reform. The family then declared only 4,900 hectares of the entity as land assets "while the more

expensive portions... located near roads and residential/commercial areas were segregated and declared the property of the other Cojuangco corporations outside HLI." The HLI owners also excluded land improvements such as roads, irrigation canals, culverts, bridges, and water reservoir, thus further reducing the value of transferable stocks.

The purpose of this "accounting manipulation" was to depress the land value to about only one-third of the HLI's total value. As a result, the Cojuangco family, with the backing of an incumbent president, was able to maintain control of the corporation and over the entire hacienda.

The stockholdings of the tenant farmers and plantation workers are of little worth and tenants are not even permitted to plant vegetable gardens on any part of the hacienda. As well, hundreds of hectares, included in the SDO, have been reclaimed with no compensation to the farm workers. Others have lost their livelihood as wage labourers after being displaced by mechanisation.

It is precisely to maintain this state of affairs and to defend their profits that the wealthy landowners were determined to ruthlessly crush any movement for the abolition of SDO and for genuine land redistribution. The repressive measures used in the Hacienda Luisita dispute, with the aid of forces provided by President Gloria Arroyo, are not new.

About one year after Cory Aquino was elected president, police killed 13 farmers involved in a demonstration demanding land reform. The Aquino government whitewashed the infamous incident—known as the Mendiola Massacre. No one was jailed and the police commanders involved were promoted to higher posts.

While President Gloria Arroyo may yet be forced to roll a few lesser heads over the November 26 massacre, she will do all in her power to deflect blame from the government, exonerate the military chiefs and protect the wealthy Cojuangco-Aquino family.



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