

Summary executions mount in Philippine city

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The toll of extra-judicial killings of suspected criminals in Davao city is now 888 dead since 1998, according to the Tambayan Centre, a children's rights advocacy organisation. In March alone, 53 people were murdered. The government's Commission on Human Rights has estimated that of the dead, 185 were young adults and 45 were children.

The consensus of human rights organisations, locally and internationally, is that the killings are the work of a death squad acting in collusion with local government officials. In his report to the UN, Special Rapporteur Philip Alston noted a simple fact that points to official sanction: "No one involved covers his face." No one has been arrested nor charged for any of the murders.

For years, governments at the national level have refused to take action and instead backed local officials led by Davao city mayor Rodrigo Duterte. The mayor is notorious for publicly encouraging the killings, even while denying any link to the killers.

At an anti-crime summit in 2002 convened by President Gloria Arroyo, Duterte brazenly called for "an eye for eye, tooth for a tooth" approach, insisting that the "summary execution of criminals remains the most effective way to curb kidnapping and illicit drugs." He cited the example of an alleged rapist who was now "gone". Duterte added that criminals "threaten to kill, so what we'll do is we kill them, too".

As reported in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Arroyo was pleased and so were the businessmen in attendance. John Ng, president of the Federation of the Filipino-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, stated: "His advocacy is very practical. I think an iron-fist [policy] will solve the problem of kidnappings. This will lead to economic progress." The same year, Duterte was appointed Arroyo's anti-crime consultant and has been

retained in that position since.

In March this year, under growing international pressure, the Commission on Human Rights led by newly-appointed chief commissioner Leila De Lima conducted a two-day public inquiry into the killings. Duterte and local police simply denied any pattern to the murders, the existence of a death squad or any government support for the killers. According to the *Mindanao Insider*, the chief police investigator stated the killings were not the handiwork of a death squad, but perpetrated by "gangs, syndicated crime groups and communists".

Rhetorically addressing the killers, Duterte postured: "If I catch you, I will kill you in public." Police officials were no less contemptuous. A top Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency official boasted to the inquiry of neutralising drug dealers and presented a watch list of "drug personalities," of whom 43 people considered "neutralised" were dead.

The rise of Duterte and his cronies in Davao city is a product of the bankrupt perspective of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). In the 1980s, the city on the southern island of Mindanao was a stronghold of the resistance to the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Citywide strikes by workers and protests by students and peasants in the surrounding province were frequent.

The CCP, however, is based on the Stalinist "two-stage" perspective that puts off the struggle for socialism indefinitely and subordinates the working class to so-called progressive sections of the bourgeoisie. Its focus on peasant guerrillaism relegated the working class to the role of a minor auxiliary to the CPP's peasant fighters.

In practice, as the CPP turned Davao city into a laboratory for urban warfare, the militancy of the working class died away. The CPP's New People's Army (NPA)

carried out waves of assassinations against low-level state security personnel, including informants and traffic policemen. Individual terrorism was glorified and its exponents hailed as heroes.

The downfall of Marcos in 1986 and the installation of Corazon Aquino as president led to the swift disintegration of the mass movement in Davao. Having built its movement on the narrow aim of ousting Marcos, the CPP was utterly incapable of countering the widespread illusions in Aquino and her People Power protests. Many NPA cadres based in Davao city and the surrounding province, trained mostly in military work, surrendered in this period.

Having stabilised her rule, Aquino went on the counterattack in 1987, unsheathing the “sword of war” against the working class. Nationwide, strikes and protests were brutally suppressed. Vigilantes were unleashed against union leaders and members. In Davao, former NPA cadres and thugs were organised in a death squad called ALSA MASA that virtually wiped out the CPP and NPA from the city.

Duterte is the heir to this history. A former state prosecutor, Duterte campaigned for the mayor’s post on a law-and-order program of restoring the peace in the city. He claimed that rising drug abuse was the cause of a wave of petty crime in the 1990s and vowed to deal with the criminals. He first took office in 1998 and, soon after, the wave of extra-judicial killings began. Duterte is now in his sixth term in office.

Far from mounting a political campaign against Duterte, the CPP and the NPA reached an informal agreement with the mayor. The NPA has not deployed or organised armed units in the city. In exchange, the vigilantes have not targeted members or leaders of CPP-linked organisations.

Davao city is even lauded by CPP-linked organisations as a haven, amid the killing of political activists elsewhere in the country by military-linked thugs. According to the *davaotoday* web site, Omar Bantayan of the leftist Kilusang Mayo Uno, insisted Duterte was “anti-globalisation, anti-liberalisation, anti-deregulation and anti-privatisation”.

The CPP-aligned organisation Bayan Muna has supported Duterte and in 2007 ran a candidate for the city

council under the banner of Duterte’s party. As reported in the *Manila Times*, congressperson Luz Ilagan of the Gabriela party, another CPP-linked group, declared last month: “The mayor deserves our support. Those from outside the city cannot appreciate what the mayor has done to maintain the order that we enjoy. Duterte’s brand of leadership has kept us safe and secure.”

However, the relationship between Duterte and the CPP’s organisations is coming under pressure as social tensions sharpen. In May last year, a peasant leader, who had been campaigning against rising food prices, was assassinated—the first murder of a leftist in Davao city for years. Last month, the daughter of a key NPA leader was kidnapped, raped, tortured and killed.

Duterte sought to assure the CPP that those responsible would be dealt with. The two murders, however, have been linked to army personnel and any attempt to bring them to justice would anger both the military and the Arroyo administration. In fact, the decision to institute a Commission on Human Rights inquiry may well be a warning to Duterte to fall into line.

The inquiry itself has limited terms of reference and relies on the same security forces that are in all likelihood involved, directly or indirectly, with the Davao death squad. Duterte has not been suspended pending the outcome of the inquiry nor is any action likely unless he further irritates the military. If anyone at all is implicated, it will be a handful of low-level scapegoats.

The inquiry does not signal any decision by Arroyo to put an end to the death squads that operate throughout the country against leftists and union leaders as well as petty criminals. In fact, the extra-judicial murder of alleged drug dealers is continuing in Davao and appears to be spreading to other cities.



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