

Demonstrator shot dead in housing demolition in the Philippines

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1 May 2012

Filipino police violently dispersed protestors who were barricading the streets to their community that had been scheduled to be demolished in Metro Manila on April 23.

The Silverio Compound in Parañaque houses 28,000 people and a small market. Jun Bernabe, mayor of Parañaque, had ordered the homes to be demolished to make way for a condominium and retail development despite a pending court case disputing the demolition. Police SWAT units opened fire on the demonstrators. A nineteen-year-old male was killed, 39 residents were injured.

The 9.7 hectare Silverio Compound resembles countless shantytowns across the sprawling metropolis. It is a labyrinth of tight alleyways, lined with homes constructed from hollow block, plywood and particle board; tarpaulin from old political ads covers holes in the walls, and the roofs are a patchwork of rusty corrugated metal weighed down with discarded tires. Twenty-eight thousand workers, school children, market vendors, make the compound their home.

In 2003, then Mayor Joey Marquez initiated plans to develop some form of socialized housing on the compound. Marquez never pushed the plans forward as they were the routine sop of populist promises. The plans were scrapped when Jun Bernabe became mayor in 2004. He signed a deal with mall and condominium developer SMDC, owned by the wealthiest man in the Philippines, Henry Sy, to construct medium rise condominiums and commercial property on the land once the residents were evicted.

On April 10 an eviction notice was served. A

demolition crew was scheduled on April 23 to begin the work of tearing down the residents' homes and stores. Those evicted were to be relocated to Montalban, Rizal or Bulacan—provincial hinterlands on the outskirts of Manila's urban sprawl. The administration of President Aquino has been ruthlessly and relentlessly pursuing a policy of forcibly relocating the urban poor onto the dismal floodplains of Marikina.

There is no livelihood in the relocation centers. To commute back to their previous jobs will take hours every day, and cost most of a day's earnings. Over a hundred thousand human beings have been shunted into these hastily constructed sites, a wasteland for the unwanted poor.

No community goes to the Montalban relocation center without a fight. The Silverio Compound was no exception.

On the morning of April 23, corrugated metal barricades were constructed across the highway at the entrance to the Silverio Compound. Residents gathered in the thousands. Over a hundred police arrived in full riot gear. Many were from SWAT and carried M16 rifles. According to residents, snipers were placed on nearby buildings. This fits with the pattern of previous evictions in which snipers were photographed aiming their rifles at the protesting residents.

Manila has been brutally hot for the past three weeks. Each day has seen a new record temperature set. The residents of Silverio negotiated with the police, the mayor's office and the demolition team.

Tensions mounted. Unable to get the residents to lift

the barricades after several hours of negotiations, the police fired tear gas canisters into the crowd. Some residents responded by hurling rocks at the police. Teenage boys used slingshots. Several news reporters captured footage that shows the police levelling their M16s at the demonstrators and firing. The protestors dispersed.

As the police approached the barricades, video footage showed a young man, curled in a fetal position on the rubble strewn pavement, a pool of blood under his head. He died from a gunshot to the head.

Thirty-nine other residents were severely injured, several from gunshot wounds. A sixteen-year-old boy was shot through the arm, shattering his humerus. He was sent home from the hospital untreated because he did not have the P15,000 (US\$350) to pay for treatment.

The police began arrested residents, seemingly at random. Thirty-three were arrested, eight of them were minors. Video footage showed police hitting, kicking and beating with a truncheon the already handcuffed prisoners.

The young man dead from a gunshot to the head was Arnel Leonor Tolentino. He was nineteen. His mother, Glenda, spoke to the press. His family was involved in *capiz* manufacturing. They would take the thin, fragile layers of mother-of-pearl and turn them into tourist trinkets and Christmas lanterns. She described their lives: “At times we would just cry and feel helpless because it was already lunchtime and we still did not have any idea where to get our food. But since [Arnel] was very resourceful, he would sometimes go home bringing rice.”

In the wake of the demolition, the police, the mayor’s office, and the Department of Justice launched an investigation into the events. It was a whitewash of police conduct. The secretary of the Justice Department, Leila de Lima, stated that Tolentino died from a .38 caliber bullet fired by a resident and not from an M16. No independent autopsy was performed.

The claim that Tolentino was shot by a resident is

belied by the numerous M16 rounds lining the street in front of the Silverio Compound, by the footage of the SWAT repeatedly firing at residents, and by the several residents who suffered gunshot wounds from the SWAT assault.

In the face of the public outcry against the events at the Silverio Compound, the head of the Department on Interior and Local Government declared a temporary moratorium on all demolitions. This moratorium will last just long enough for the public anger to subside and for media attention to be distracted and then it will be lifted.

President Aquino bears complete political responsibility for the brutal attack on the residents of the Silverio Compound. His administration, like those of his predecessors, has treated the working urban poor like so much human detritus. His administration has worked closely with real estate developers to tear down the homes of untold thousands. When the residents refuse to go quietly, he has overseen their forcible removal. When the police forces have shot, clubbed, gassed and beaten the residents, in the full view of the public, he has ordered the events to be whitewashed.

The brutal police measures of the Aquino administration are being deployed not just against shanty-town dwellers but against the entire working class. Today is May 1 and rallies and demonstrations are planned across the city. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* today quoted the National Capital Region police superintendent Danilo Pecana regarding the protests: “We have police forces on standby with firearms, in case rallies go violent.” Police Special Action Forces were placed on full alert, as were “all available assets” of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and four private contractor “civil disturbance management companies.”



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