

# Philippines man killed by store security for alleged theft of sandals

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On April 12, 23-year-old Mario Ducayag was killed by store security guards in the Philippines city of Cebu, after being accused of stealing a pair of sandals that cost less than a thousand pesos (\$US25).

A secondary school graduate, Ducayag was unemployed and had two children, one of them three years old, to support. Like millions of Filipinos confronting the bleak choice of long-term unemployment or taking a poverty wage job, Ducayag instead resorted to leaving his family to seek work overseas. According to a report in the *Sun Star*, he had enrolled in a housekeeping course in February to prepare to apply with an agency as a migrant worker.

Ducayag was shopping at Metro Gaisano-Colon, the largest department store in downtown Cebu City, where he bought infant milk formula, diapers, biscuits, and a pair of sandals. Ducayag apparently lost the receipt for the sandals. When he went to the cashier's counter to request a copy, he was accused of attempting to steal the sandals. According to the *Sun Star*, a store supervisor called in store security and Ducayag was brought to the security office for interrogation.

Ducayag reportedly denied the accusation, and was then beaten by the store's security personnel in an effort to extract a confession. Thirty minutes later, Ducayag was brought out of the security office and rushed to a hospital where he was declared dead on arrival.

From the beginning, the department store security and the police sought to cover up the case. Police authorities told the press that Ducayag had been accused in other cases of shoplifting. The police regional medico-legal officer stated in his report that Ducayag had died because of "asphyxia due to pulmonary tuberculosis"—in other words, a pre-existing medical condition, and not the security guards' assault,

was responsible.

This joint cover-up is not at all surprising. Security agencies and the Philippine police have an almost incestuous relationship. Security agencies are run, owned and manned by retired police officers or have active duty high-ranking officers as silent partners. Big businesses invariably appoint or hire retired military or police generals as their overall heads of security.

The persistent efforts of Ducayag's family, and the support of a local tabloid news radio station, provoked the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) to conduct a second autopsy on the victim, twelve days after his death. Manned largely by civilian lawyers, the NBI is an institutional rival of the police and the military authorities. It is often deployed by the state to provide the façade of an alternative to the ruthlessness of the other state security agencies.

The NBI autopsy revealed that Ducayag's cervical vertebrae were dislocated and he had bruises in his palms, right shoulder, chest and back. In addition, his lungs had congestion and bruises. His left lung had collapsed. The NBI autopsy concluded that Ducayag had died because of "traumatic neck injuries". He had been beaten to death.

Ducayag was buried last month, attended by his family and a number of sympathisers.

Following the NBI autopsy, the department security personnel responsible for the killing have apparently fallen out with each other, each filing affidavits accusing the others of responsibility. However, neither the police nor the NBI has filed a single case against any suspect. The Ducayag family has filed a number of complaints against the medico-legal officer for his allegedly false autopsy report.

The murder of Ducayag is an expression of the appalling social, economic and political conditions

confronting workers in the Philippines.

Last month, the government of President Aquino admitted that despite last year's 6.8 percent economic expansion, poverty was officially estimated at 27.9 percent of the population. The rate of subsistence, or those regarded as being in extreme poverty, was estimated at 10 percent. This month, the Social Weather Station estimated that 25.4 percent of those aged 18 and above were unemployed.

Despite this mass unemployment and poverty, personal consumption accounts for more than 70 percent of the Philippine economy. This consumption is above all fuelled by the huge discretionary income of the top 10 percent of all families in the country, which control more than 35 percent of total income. The remittances of overseas contract workers, which amount to well over US\$20 billion dollars a year, are almost entirely spent on the basic needs of their families back home and thus fund another significant portion of domestic consumption.

Retail sales are ratcheted up by various predatory instalment plans, personal loans, and other microcredit schemes that charge interest rates of up to 30 percent a year. The retail sector also rests upon the super exploitation of store workers and sales personnel.

The largest and most profitable mall and department store chain in the country, the SM Group, is owned by Henry Sy, the wealthiest man in the Philippines, and his family, which has a net worth of over US\$13.5 billion dollars. One son, Harly Sy, head of the family's investment arm, earns a monthly compensation of over PHP 700,000 pesos (US\$17,000) a month. Hans Sy, another son, who heads the shopping mall operations, earns a monthly income of over PHP 400,000 pesos.

In sharp contrast, a saleswoman employed in one of the SM Group's 46 shopping malls in the Philippines almost always has her employment limited to a five-month contract, allowing the company to avoid legal obligations to award her a permanent position. Sales staff earn no more than PHP 8,000 (\$US200) a month. If she is a part-time worker, working for 4 hours a day, seven days a week, she will earn less than half of that.

These malls and department stores operate under tense social conditions generated by extreme social inequality. Millions of working class and young people flock to these retail outlets every day to enjoy the air conditioning, to watch the free mall-sponsored variety

shows featuring scantily clad third-tier celebrities sing and dance, and if they are fortunate, eat some cheap fast food. For the vast majority, the wealth of commodities that stock the shelves and fill the window displays are simply to be looked at. These items cannot be afforded.

Under these conditions, the security personnel's brutality is deliberately encouraged by management and the heads of the security companies. The cost of any theft is deducted from the wages of the low ranking security guards—making every window shopper seen as a potential threat to the guards' own precarious position.



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