

Video of police killing sparks mass outrage in the Philippines

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On Sunday evening, an off-duty police officer in the rural Philippines publicly executed an unarmed woman and her son, shooting each in the head at point blank range and then firing into their corpses on the ground. The brutal murder was clearly recorded on a bystander's phone and uploaded to the internet. Within less than an hour it had gone viral, and by the next morning an explosion of outrage against police killings was shaking the country.

It is Christmas week and provincial villages throughout the Philippines glow with the colorful lights of parol lanterns and their populations swell with returning workers from Manila, coming home for the holidays. The shooting took place in Paniqui, Tarlac, a rice farming town on the northern edge of Central Luzon, about four hours north of Manila.

Sonya Gregorio, 52-years old, and her son, Frank Anthony, 25, were gathered with friends in the open grassy space between the unfinished hollow block houses clustered together on the edge of the ricefields. Frank Anthony and the neighbors were setting off boga, a makeshift firework constructed from pvc pipe.

Jonel Nuezca, an off-duty police Senior Master Sergeant from the Metro Manila municipality of Paranaque, visiting Paniqui for the holidays, arrived with his service revolver on his belt and his 13-year-old daughter in tow and began accosting the family. Initially the argument erupted over the noise of the boga, but it quickly turned into a dispute over property and right-of-way. Heated squabbles over easements are common in the rural Philippines where there is often only one thoroughfare and the lots and houses crowd together for access.

What follows is documented from the brutal camera footage of the murder.

Nuezca threatened and physically menaced Frank

Anthony, drawing his gun, declaring that he would arrest him. He had no warrant, no charges, nor was he on-duty. In the climate of ubiquitous police violence created by the Duterte administration, to be taken away by a police officer could easily be a death sentence. If a police officer shoots anyone who is said to have been resisting, “nanlaban,” the charges are immediately dropped.

Sonya Gregorio clung to her son, wrapping her arms around his chest, desperately trying to protect him from the police officer dragging him away by the arms. The gathered neighbors and children were screaming in fear and anger, powerless. What could they do? Call the police?

Nuezca's daughter threatened the mother, telling her, “My father is police man.” “I don't care,” Sonya Gregorio responded. Nuezca shot Gregorio at point blank range in the head, then her son, and then fired into their bodies on the ground. “Mission accomplished,” he said, putting his arm around his daughter as they walked away.

Nuezca rode his motorcycle to a neighboring police precinct of Rosales, Pangasinan, where he turned himself in. There is no doubt that he expected impunity, the same mass impunity from criminal charges that had been extended to police throughout the country for the past four years. He had not calculated on the video of his crime going viral and setting off a firestorm of protest.

The graphic video documented what was not an exceptional event, but the reality of life under the rule of police violence cultivated by the so-called war on drugs of the Duterte administration. Every day for the past four years there have been scores victims of police and vigilante killings. Three or four other such deaths were reported on the Sunday of the Paniqui double

homicide.

As the video of the killing went viral, angry posts on social media with #StopTheKillingsPH and similar hashtags were circulating in the hundreds of thousands. A significant number of posts demanded for the police to be abolished entirely.

Recognizing the mass anger, the administration distanced itself from Nuezca, referring to his actions as a crime and an “isolated incident.” On Monday evening, looking to contain the growing outrage, Duterte delivered an unscheduled address to the nation, in which he claimed that Nuezca was “crazy.”

The murder of Sonya and Frank Anthony Gregorio was not an “isolated incident.” Nuezca, it quickly emerged, had committed multiple prior homicides, two in 2019. He had been brought up on charges of gross misconduct for refusing drug testing and refusing to appear in court. All charges had been dropped. His case is representative of the climate of impunity Duterte has created.

Duterte has delivered numerous speeches in which he has publicly told the police that if suspects resist, “shoot them.” “I will protect you,” he has repeatedly declared. Since he took office, over 8,000 people have been killed by the police and more than 20,000 have been killed by vigilantes. He is overseeing a war against the poor and the working population of genocidal proportions.

Last week, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced that its preliminary investigation into the conduct of the war on drugs in the Philippines had revealed evidence of “crimes against humanity” by the Duterte administration, including mass murder and torture. They would extend their investigation, they declared, into 2021.

Debold Sinas, head of the Philippine National Police, issued a statement condemning Nuezca. But then he instructed the public that in the future no one should record or photograph police activity.

The mass outrage over the Paniqui murders, and the widespread calls for the end to police killings, puts paid to the pernicious lie spread in the media that Duterte’s “war on drugs” is “wildly popular.” This much-repeated claim, circulated in the international media, is based on surveys of the population that simultaneously report that 8 out of 10 Filipinos fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones as a result of the killings.

There is a climate of fear that grips the country and not mass approval for the fascistic policies of Duterte.

The support for these policies rests with the ruling elites, who see in the authoritarian crackdown a defense of their property interests against the threat of working class unrest. They are rehabilitating all of the old apparatus of dictatorship from the Marcos era. In the town of Paniqui, where Sonya and Frank Anthony Gregorio were murdered, a statue of Ferdinand Marcos, the brutal and hated dictator, has been erected in the center of the town plaza.



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