

Killings of two farmers in Hacienda Batuan, Masbate: the NPA suspected

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FACT SHEET

Title: Killings of two farmers in Hacienda Batuan, Masbate

Case: SUMMARY EXECUTION

Victim: Rene Llabres and Junrie Pagaspas

Alleged Perpetrators: 7 unidentified armed men believed to be members of the New People's Army

Date of Incident: July 6, 2008, between 5 AM to 6 AM

Place of Incident: Sitio Biton, Brgy. Royroy Batuan, Masbate

Motive: Agrarian-related conflict

Account of Incident:

On 06 July, 2008 at about 6:10 in the morning in Batuan, Masbate, Junrie Pagaspas, 28 yrs. old, was tortured and brutally murdered by four fully armed men in military uniform. On the same date and at about the same time, Rene Llabres, 32 yrs. old, a neighbor of Pagaspas was also taken by three armed men and was later found to have been brutally tortured and killed right beside Junrie Pagaspas' dead body. The perpetrators were believed to be members of the New People's Army. The victims dead bodies were found about 200 meters away from their houses. Both victims were members of the Samahan ng mga Magsasaka ng Hacienda Batuan (SAMAHABA) whose members petitioned for the coverage of the said landholding under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). SAMAHABA members have been subjected to numerous forms of harassment after their petition for agrarian reform was submitted to the government.

Before the cold-blooded killings, the victims were active members of SAMAHABA. They participated in its campaign for non-payment of landlord's share to prove that they were tenants and to insist on the abolition of the sharing system, where they get only a third of the produce, in favor of the legally mandated leasehold system, where they were supposed to get 75% of the net harvest.

During that fateful day, Junrie Pagaspas was surprised when alleged NPAs visited his house. The armed men at first called him to come out. When he refused, the armed men forcibly dragged him out and tied him with a shoe string. He cried out for help from his mother Leonida and wife Jennifer. But both froze in fear and could only weep at the sight of the heavily armed men dragging Junrie. After more than half an hour, they heard several gunshots. They went to the direction of the gunshots and found Junrie sprawled in his own blood. He bore 8 gunshot wounds and several stab wounds.

Before the incident, immediate family members who spoke on condition of anonymity claimed that Junrie had received several verbal threats from the farm manager. The witnesses also claimed that Junrie also received a letter demanding that he stopped harvesting coconuts: "Itigil no na ang pagkokopras nyo" (stop harvesting coconuts), the letter as quoted by a relative stated. He ignored the said warnings and continued working on the land.

In the case of Rene Llabres, relatives said at least 3 suspected NPA members allegedly went to his house on that day. The armed men called him saying: "Lumabas ka ng bahay kung ayaw mong madamay pati ang mag-ina mo!" (Get out of your house if you do not want your family to get hurt). When he went out with his child, the alleged NPAs ordered his wife to get his son from Llabres, who followed terrified at the sight of the heavily armed men. After this, the suspected NPAs tied his hand and forcibly dragged him about 200 meters away from his house. After less than an hour, the terrified relatives heard several gunshots.

Then his wife Maribel ran to him and saw his lifeless body lying close to the dead body of Pagaspas. The victim also bore signs of torture with stab wounds and five (5) gunshot wounds on different parts of the body.

The victims were long-time tenants of Hacienda Batuan, an agrarian reform hotspot. They were dependent on farming for their sources of income. In the year 2002, they learned that the neighboring hacienda, ARALAND, a 275-hectare coconut plantation, was placed under the government's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and was distributed to its actual tenant-cultivators most of whom were relatives of the tenants in the neighboring Hacienda Batuan. This successful reform encouraged many of the tenants of Hacienda Batuan to petition for CARP implementation, thus giving birth to the formation of SAMAHABA.

Once the petition was filed at the Department of Agrarian Reform Office however, the hacienda administrator started to use various forms of intimidation including verbal threats, filing of criminal cases and physical harassment aimed to dissuade the tenants from continuing their land reform initiative. As a result of these incidents of harassment, some leaders and tenants left the area for fear of their lives.

Things turned more violent when, prior to this latest killings, Botsoy Vale, one of the leaders of the organization and a Barangay Captain of Sawang, a barangay within Hacienda Batuan was brutally killed by fully armed men in military uniform last Dec. 22, 2007. A month before Vale was murdered, his brother, a municipal councilor and a supporter of the petition for land reform was also forcibly taken and tortured by the NPAs.

Prior to the petition for coverage, the owners of Hacienda Batuan was able to secure an exemption order from the DAR, on the ground that the entire landholding is allegedly exclusively utilized for cattle raising. SAMAHABA has been calling on the government to review the said Order contending that the land not entirely devoted to cattle raising; it is also planted to coconut and rice and it is through such use that the owners derived their main income from the land. Furthermore, and as evidence of the agricultural activity inside the hacienda, they pointed to the existing sharing system, where tenants get only 25% from the produce where they shoulder the cost of production. The 1,419-hectare hacienda is co-owned by Rafael Resurrecion and Lydia Honasan. The hacienda covers 5 villages namely, Sawang, Burgos, Panisihan, Royroy and Gibraltar.

The hacienda has a 300-hectare portion planted to palay (rice), 400 hectares are devoted to coconut trees and the rest is allotted for cattle grazing. Around 200 tenants are currently working in the coconut lands. The tenants alleged that they were stopped from cultivating the rice prior to the application of the landowners for exemption. They would later learn that this was to make sure that

the ocular inspection conducted by the DAR would not find any tenant wrking on riceland. The tenants also alleged that the application for exemption was unknown to them until it as approved in 2003.

Last August 2005, the members of the peasant organization filed a Petition for Leasehold to replace the share tenancy system. To prove there was tenancy, the petitioners for leasehold implementation stopped giving the 75% share of the landowner in 2005.

A case of Qualified Theft was filed against the members of the SAMAHABA in that same year. But this was dismissed in May 2006 by the Provincial Prosecutor's Office after the tenants submitted as evidence their notebooks which showed the signature of the "encargado" (farm manager) of the landowner that he had received the 75% share of the harvest. Another evidence they submitted was the list of tenants which was given to them by Palma Martinez, the former Chief of the hacienda's security force. The tenants said their grandparents arrived in the area as early as 1913 when the owner was still a certain Narciso Aligada.

Botsoy Vale, the first farmer-victim of summary killing, got the ire of the landowners when he led the filing of a Petition for Leasehold and their refusal to give the 75% share of the harvest. Last November 2005, while their organization was having a meeting his house was burned down.

With the failure of the armed goons of the landowners to stop the growth of reform-movement inside the hacienda, the New People's Army started to get involved by dissuading farmers from pursuing their land claim asserting that CARP is a bogus agrarian reform program. They would later on participate in physically harassing tenants. The NPA admitted to the killing of Botsoy Vale, after Akbayan!, a party-list, denounced the killing of Botsoy Vale (and Deoly Empas, a leader in Bondoc Peninsula) through a privilege speech delivered in March, 2008. [1] During the first week of June 2008, the NPA command in the province of Masbate issued a statement posted in their website admitting to the killing of Vale.

To justify the killing of Vale, the NPAs hurled numerous accusations against Vale that purportedly were the ground for his trial in the NPAs kangaroo court and his eventual killing. After the killing of Vale, a death list of 18 more tenants was distributed by armed men. Junrie Pagaspas was number 10 on the said hit list.

The immediate relatives of victims Pagaspas and Llabres still refuses to give their sworn statement or affidavits to the police for fear that they will be targeted next. A reign of terror has gripped the area since December, 2007, slowly paralyzing the organization and their claim for land rights.

The Catholic Bishop of Masbate. Most Rev. Joel Z. Baylon, D.D, in a statement issued on June 9, 2008, has condemned the killing in no uncertain term and appelaed to the perpetrator to respect the right to life of the victims who were weak and defenseless.

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Footnotes

[1] See: [Akayan Rep. Risa Hontiveros' speech denouncing the killings and torture of farmers in Masbate and Bondoc by the NPA](#) and [Assassination of farmer left activists by the NPA](#)