

Philippines: Akbayan says NPA has blood on their hands

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Akbayan Statement-Response to the veiled threat of New People's Army against AKBAYAN on the Issue of CARP and Peasant Killings in Masbate and Bondoc Peninsula

In a letter dated June 5, 2008, the Jose Rapsing Command of the New People's Army directly responded to a privilege speech made by Rep. Risa Hontiveros Baraquel on killings perpetrated by the NPA to peasant leaders in Bondoc Peninsula and Quezon.

AKBAYAN condemns in the strongest possible terms this letter designed to threaten democratic organizations like AKBAYAN, to create a culture of fear among people's organizations and farming communities, and to warn against the pursuit of agrarian reform via the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP).

While in its essence a n admission by the armed group of the National Democratic Front of the killing of Butchoy Vale, a peasant leader and barangay captain of Bgy. Royroy, Masbate. Beyond that, it too is a serious warning against those pursuing a path different from that chosen by the NPA. To quote from the letter:

"Hindi kami naniniwalang masosolusyonan ng sa amin ay repormismo, ekonomismo at oportunismong linyang dala dala nyo ang problema ng mga naghihirap na masa pero habang hindi naman kayo gumagawa ng ano mang hakbang na ikakapahamak ng buhay nino man sa masa at mga kasama ay hindi kami hahantong sa paggamit ng armas laban sa inyo."

It is easy to get lost in the murky details of the twelve-page letter of the Jose Rapsing Command, virtually all of which are blatant falsehoods designed to justify the cold-blooded execution of Butchoy Vale in their hands as judge, jury and executioner. How convenient it must be for them that Butchoy could no longer refute the accusations against him, or that his death has so created a culture of silence and fear in the community that no one is willing to speak against them or condemn their excesses.

AKBAYAN also maintains that the killing of Butchoy Vale should be viewed for what it truly is: an assault not only on democracy and human rights, but more particularly, on community organizing and state-sponsored agrarian reform. The systematic harassment of the community by the armed group began only after the community was organized to petition for agrarian reform and to question the oppressive share-tenancy relations. The goons of the landowner and the NPA colluded in order to thwart the farmers' desire to own their land.

In admitting to close relations with the landowner, the NPA said:

"Dahil siguro sa alam ng may ari ng rantso na nasa lugar na ang Hukbo at nakita nilang seryoso at desidido ang mga masang kaharap nila ay nakipagkasundo ito at nabuo sa pagitan ng mga magsasaka at rantsero ang isang kaayusang katanggap-tanggap sa magkabilang panig."

There was, however, no improvement to speak of in the tenancy relations between the landowner and the tenants, with the landowner still getting a lion's share of the harvest.

It is truly appalling to think that amidst persistent problems like rural poverty, landowner oppression and a government that has failed to support the agriculture sector, our country's farmers have to deal with intimidation, harassment and killing from the extreme left. Its track record of peasant killings reveals that the Masbate incident is not an isolated case. In Bondoc Peninsula, they are responsible for the deaths of Reymundo Tejino and Julie Empas, with the latter death as recent as February 2008.

When an armed group like the NPA consistently and strongly object to CARP - *"tanging sa rebolusyonaryong landas ng armadong pakikibaka at hindi sa ligal na laban sa korte... makakamit ang tunay na hangarin sa lupa ng mga magsasaka"* - and register such objection through the use of violence against farming communities, how do we protect our farmers and how do we continue empowering our people's organizations on the ground?

CARP has been defeated in Congress by a combination of tactics from those with landed interests and the extreme left bloc. Its future after December 2008, remains unclear, if not altogether perilous. Absent a mechanism through which claims asserted may be granted, the welfare of our farmers hangs in the balance and they will become even more vulnerable to forces on the ground that oppress and silence.

Indeed, if another farmer, farmer-leader or community organizer is killed in pursuit of the just claim for land, it is blood on the hands of those who have sabotaged agrarian reform.