

Akbayan feels Esperon praise a left-handed compliment

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MANILA, Philippines — Being described as “good” isn’t exactly the kind of compliment this party-list organization would like to hear from the country’s top soldier.

If anything, Akbayan is furious at the sweet words from Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Hermogenes Esperon, saying the general was trying to pit the group against other leftist organizations.

“If they see Akbayan as a good [leftist] party, then why do they burn effigies of me at the end of their so-called peace rallies in their anticommunist campaigns in the rural areas?” said Akbayan Rep. Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel in a statement.

Esperon made the comments about Akbayan at a press briefing on the preliminary findings of the United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston on extrajudicial killings in the country.

Akbayan is known to have ideological differences with other leftist groups like the Bayan Muna party-list group for which the military only has harsh words. Bayan Muna claims that 127 of its members have been killed since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed office in 2001.

“Instead of using Akbayan to deodorize the [military], Esperon should take Alston’s findings as a chance to cleanse (itself of) skeletons in the closet,” Baraquel said.

Alston, a representative of the UN High Commission on Human Rights, on Wednesday concluded his 10-day visit to investigate political killings in the Philippines.

In a preliminary assessment, he said the military “remains in a state of almost total denial of the need to respond effectively and authentically to the significant number of killings.”

Consistent condemnation

Esperon’s praise for Akbayan was apparently the result of the group’s consistent condemnation of atrocities committed by the New People’s Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Bayan Muna is identified with the CPP.

In a dialogue with Alston last Tuesday, Akbayan Rep. Loreta Ann Rosales told the UN representative that the NPA had engaged in “terrorist activities” like the burning of civilian trucks.

Alston asked if Akbayan’s position against the NPA was leaning toward that of the military’s, which has blamed the communist rebels for the political killings.

Baraquel said that while Akbayan had been vocal against the NPA, it also “condemned to the strongest degree” the alleged abuses of the military.

“Akbayan has always upheld the universality of human rights and human dignity. We condemn

abuses whether committed by the state or by armed groups like the NPA," she said.

Disqualification

The conflict between Bayan Muna and Akbayan has worsened with the filing of a disqualification case against Bayan Muna Representatives Satur Ocampo and Teodoro Casiño in the party-list election in May.

The case was based on criminal charges filed against the two for allegedly ordering the killing of an Akbayan member.

Bayan Muna on Thursday asked the Commission on Elections to junk the petition, saying it was the handiwork of "Malacañang and military and police officials, using alleged Akbayan members, to discredit and demolish" the group.

Baraquel denied that the disqualification case was "sanctioned or ordered by Akbayan."

Despite the differences, both groups agreed that the government should act immediately on Alston's recommendations.

"An independent and impartial probe has been undertaken ... and the major finding is that soldiers were behind the many slays. The next logical step is to order the military to put a stop to this madness," said Ocampo.

"It should lead to a credible inquiry on extrajudicial killings," Baraquel said.

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