

Release

# A call for action in defense of the Masbate farmers faced to extra-judicial killings

Thursday 14 August 2008, by [FORMANES Belinda](#), [PARRDS](#) (Date first published: 14 August 2008).

August 13, 2008

Dear Friends and Fellow Human Rights Defenders,

As in the past, the struggle of Filipino farmers for the implementation of agrarian reform continues to be confronted with animosity by the landlords/landowners. The list of Filipino peasants victimized by inhuman acts committed by the state and non state entities continue to mount but has since then, merely reduced as part of the statistics of human rights violation victims.

The plight of Masbate tenants have gone from bad to worst when extra-judicial killings happened from December, 2007 until July, 2008. The victims were either peasant leaders or members of several peoples' organization.

## CASE BRIEF:

**Mark Anthony "Butch" Vale**, leader of a peasant organization called Samahan ng mga Magsasaka ng Hacienda Batuan was brutally murdered by armed men around 10:00 in the morning of December 22, 2007. Multiple gunshot wounds killed him instantly. Months later, the killing was owned by the New Peoples' Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Their confirmation and justification of Mark Anthony Vale's death was posted at their website after a privilege speech was delivered in congress by Akbayan Partylist Representative Riza Hontiveros in condemnation of non-state human rights atrocities citing the Vale's killing as the case in point.

Killings took place again in the early morning of July 6, 2008 when **Junrie Pagaspas**, 28 yrs old and **Rene Llabres**, 32 yrs old were summarily executed allegedly by 14 armed men, seven of which were hacienda guards in Batuan and were identified as Mario Martinez, Juan Santua, Michael Brioso, Recto Letada, Rey Letada, Rene Abano and Jerson Resurrection. Pagaspas sustained four gunshot wounds while Llabres succumbed to gunshot and stab wounds and a blasting injury. The killing was done in cold blood as the wives of the victims stood from nearby and unwillingly served as mute witnesses to the murder.

On July 20, 2008, in the town of Monreal, another peasant leader, **Alberto Yusi** was allegedly taken out from his house by force, hogtied and forced to kneel. Yusi died caused by a lone gunshot wound that pierced his lungs. The agony of losing a loved one, in perhaps the most brutal way is one thing that Beatrice, Alberto's wife and son Alvin have to deal with until today as they witnessed how Alfredo was slain. The 24 unidentified armed men, at least two of them had .60 caliber machineguns, casually walked and left the crime scene after taking pictures of the victim's dead body. Outnumbered and with inferior firearms, no police personnel interfere in the whole course of the incident from the time that the victim was dragged out from his house until the time that he was killed in front of his family.

Alberto Yusi was the president of Ticao Farmers Federation (TFF) and several peasant organizations in Masbate. He actively worked and called for the inclusion of Francis H. How's landholdings, where he is a tenant, to CARP's coverage. The farmers are now tangled in a legal battle with Francis How after the latter alleged that he already donated his landholdings to Silliman University, Dumaguete City. Francis How's estate is now being managed by Ticao Agro-Industrial Development Incorporated (TAIDI) of Silliman University.

The killings may not be over just yet. A list of those who will be killed next was distributed among the residents by still unidentified persons or group. Relatives of those who were killed have already fled to safer areas. The economic displacement of the victims is particularly more difficult for Jennifer and Maribel, widows of slain farmers Junrie Pagaspas and Rene Llabres since they are both nursing mothers.

Today, the victims' families and relatives seek sanctuary and are entirely depending on dole outs to sustain their needs. Their crops are ready for harvest back home in their province but not one from them would take the risk of going home.

Prior to the spate of killings, a total of forty (40) incidents of alleged ARHR violations and abuses in Masbate from 2002 until 2007 have been reported. These were allegedly perpetrated mostly by Non-State entities that included armed goons, blue guards, and the NPAs victimizing a total of two hundred-ten (210) peasants. In the same period one hundred ninety-five (195) poor farmer-beneficiaries have experienced having been harassed by landlords suing them with criminal and civil charges so to dissuade them from pursuing land reform.

Filipino farmers have suffered long enough. Agrarian reform related-human rights violations; summary execution of farmers in particular, must be stopped. It has no place in a civilized society that adheres to universally accepted human rights standards.

#### **CALL FOR SUPPORT:**

We appeal to our fellow human rights defenders to help remind the Philippine government of its international human rights obligations and demand that it undertake the following necessary interventions:

1. Render justice by conducting thorough investigation of the Masbate killings and the filing of appropriate legal actions for the immediate resolution of the cases;
2. Disarm and disband all armed groups particularly the identified armed group of the landlord in hacienda Batuan;
3. Indemnify families of the slain farmers.
4. Provide for the needs of the economically displaced victims' families.
5. Ensure the safe return of the victims to their farms and assure the protection of their human rights.
6. Consummate CARP in Masbate by fast tracking landholdings targeted for redistribution and judiciously settle pending agrarian reform cases.
7. Urge armed Non-State Actors (NSAs) particularly the New Peoples' Army to uphold and adhere to the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CAHRIHL) signed between the Government of the Republic of Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic

Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

**PLEASE SEND YOUR LETTERS TO:**

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In solidarity with the Agrarian Reform and Human Rights Violations Victims!

Sincerely,

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