

Statement from the office of Akbayan Representative Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel

## **Crackdown on opposition widens in the Philippines; effigies of opposition leaders burned in 'peace rally' organized by military**

Thursday 1 June 2006, by [HONTIVEROS Risa](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2006).

The military is poised to broaden its crackdown against anti-GMA forces. A witch hunt against democratic opposition groups in rural communities is being waged today, with the tacit support of the government.

Last Saturday, May 27, 2006, Rep. Lorna Silverio of Bulacan witnessed a so-called 'peace rally' in one of the municipalities under her district. With these 'peace rallies' becoming more common in rural areas, what caught Rep. Silverio's attention was the burning of the effigies of key opposition leaders, among them AKBAYAN Rep. Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel. The demonstrators were carrying placards that warn the public to shun the infiltrators of communism, an allegedly growing menace that should be thwarted immediately.

These "peace rallies" are the concluding activity of the military's community-based anti-insurgency workshops. In an act that is truly reminiscent of the Salem witch hunt, they rallies are done in town plazas or major thoroughfares, where effigies of suspected Communist leaders are burned and their names ostracized. Gen. Jovito Palparan, an unapologetic McCarthyist, has boasted several times that he has personally organized some of these rallies. How the military has come up with this list has always been questionable, and the whole method itself has been proven ineffective in responding to insurgency.

What it does, instead, is stoke an irrational fear and hatred against all forms of dissent and opposition in local communities. It creates an environment where extrajudicial killings are employed as a means to regulate dissent, and worse, tolerated by the general public. It also prods civilians to bear arms and take side in a conflict where violence from both sides has rendered the possibility of dialogue and peaceful resolution nil.

What makes an already disturbing situation graver is this: the ridiculous inclusion of opposition leaders like AKBAYAN Rep. Risa Hontiveros, who happens to be a former member of the peace panel representing the government, means that the military wishes to push its envelope further. The government's indolence and ineptitude in pursuing the numerous cases of extrajudicial killings has emboldened the military's sense of impunity, and they now believe that they can include just about anybody - members of the Communist Party, journalists, peasant leaders, democratic and openly legal opposition personalities - in their hate list.

The symbolic burning of effigies by a government institution that controls the coercive arms of the State is meant to send a chilling effect on opposition organizations and their constituents. It also means that communities are being primed to tolerate and accept a wider crackdown against the opposition. What makes the act more barbaric and unjust is the fact that it is being employed against organizations and groups that have chosen to uphold the free market of ideas, not violence, as an

expression of their struggle for reforms.

We denounce in the strongest terms this witch hunt against members of the opposition. If it continues to be tolerated, these military tactics would worsen a carnage that is already crippling our democracy. We vow to exercise the full weight of Congress' oversight authority to investigate this witch hunt and compel the AFP to stop committing acts that violate fundamental freedoms and basic rights.

We shall also hold the current government accountable for its failure to check the abuses that the military wantonly commits. We likewise urge the House leadership to act with prompt and diligence against this assault against our democracy and against the members of the opposition. The impunity being enjoyed by the military would only end if all institutions would start speaking against these abuses.

These acts of intimidation would fail because we will neither be silenced nor forced to use violence to promote our goals. Rather, we will take this situation as an opportunity to celebrate our version of democracy, where the truth reigns supreme and the people are not mobilized through terror, but through respect for human dignity and the full enjoyment of basic rights and fundamental freedoms.

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