

Philippines: Death squads escalate their dirty work

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Manila,

Many Australians would assume that death squads, disappearances, harassment by the military, violent dispersal of demonstrations and political prisoners were features of the Philippines that vanished when Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship was overthrown in 1986.

However, subsequent governments have continued to use state repression against political activists from all sectors — workers, urban poor and peasants, particularly agrarian reform activists, and against the oppressed Moro nation in the southern island of Mindanao — in the guise of combating the Communist Party of the Philippines-aligned New People's Army (NPA).

Like many governments around the world, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's government has used Washington's phony "war on terrorism" as cover for unleashing state terror. Her regime has been cracking down on dissent since coming to power in 2001. Repression has been stepped up since the beginning of 2005.

Before I visited the Philippines in the first week of February, I was aware that there had been political killings of left activists in 2005 and 2006. However, I wasn't prepared for the scale of the state repression.

In the seven days that I was in the Philippines, four activists were assassinated. There was an unconfirmed report that a fifth was also killed

After an investigation in early February, UN special rapporteur Philip Alston condemned Arroyo's government for the extrajudicial killings. Philippines human rights group Karapatan estimates that 830 people have been killed or disappeared since Arroyo came to power.

I joined an international delegation from Venezuela, Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, Nepal, India and Sweden to hear the testimonies of victims of state repression in the Central Luzon region, north of Metro Manila.

Arroyo rejects claims that the killings have been carried out by death squads connected to the army or police. However, the killings in Central Luzon coincided with the military's arrival in the region.

In some areas where there are big struggles for agrarian reform, private armies working for the big landlord families have killed workers and peasants. The landlords have gained confidence from the

fact that the military is killing with impunity, even when witnesses can identify the soldiers involved.

As well as activists, 45 journalists have been killed since Arroyo came to power. Six of them died in 2006 and another 25 experienced attempts on their lives. Iraq is the only more dangerous country for reporters.

Military repression

Since 2005, the army has based seven battalions of 500 soldiers in Central Luzon. Max de Mesa, national chairperson of the Citizens Council for Human Rights, told the international delegation that the military organises many meetings with the communities. In these meetings, the military's attitude is always the same: "If there are things you do that we don't like, you will be invited to a meeting. If you still persist, we will detain you."

Aurora Broquil from the KPD (Movement for National Democracy) told the international delegation that as soon as the battalions arrived, human rights violations started happening. The militarisation has affected the lives of people in poor neighbourhoods, especially night workers and peasants who leave early to work in the fields, because they are often suspected of being NPA members by the military.

There have been more than 89 extrajudicial killings in Central Luzon since September 2005. The army in Central Luzon is under the command of Major General Pulparan, who specialises in extrajudicial killings — this became evident when Pulparan was previously in charge of the army in the region. When Pulparan returned, he announced that he would wipe out all leftists in the region and within a week the first killing occurred.

The military is not focusing on armed revolutionary groups. Anyone is a target. Even when mayors complain about military harassment, they are threatened.

The military frequently visits activists' houses. Often, these activists will later be killed unless they go into hiding, or their houses will be burned down by the military. Thousands of people have been displaced from their homes and livelihoods as a result.

The repression doesn't just affect activists. Anyone in the vicinity of a military operation is picked up on suspicion of being an NPA member. The military has turned up at people's houses to question them about a demonstration that they attended 16 years earlier.

Another tactic of the military in Central Luzon is to herd people, especially youth, into the military camp and torture them until they "confess" to being drug addicts. Then they will be tortured until they list the names of 15 other youths who are supposedly drug addicts. This tactic breaks down solidarity within communities, making people suspicious of each other and fearful of attending protests.

The international delegation met with around 10 families that had experienced family members being killed or brutally beaten. Several of these families had been forced into hiding.

Development projects

The main reason for the militarisation of Central Luzon is the strong protest movement against pet development projects of Arroyo. One project is the construction of the North Luzon expressway to

the free-trade zones in Clarke and Subic.

Another project is the North Rail, which will displace 50,000 people if it goes ahead. Arroyo is trying to implement her policies before a deadline of 2010. The people of Central Luzon have continuously mobilised against the projects, so Arroyo has used military repression to intimidate the movement.

Aurora Broquil explained that the people's organisations aren't against development but "we are asking if this development is in the interests of the people or not".

Militarisation in other areas

Central Luzon isn't the only region that is suffering from repression. It's happening all over the Philippines, especially in Mindanao, where the army has been fighting the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Repression has been worst in regional areas, but Metro Manila has also been affected.

On December 20, 30 heavily armed soldiers came to the Sanlakas Centre (Sanlakas is a multi-sector alliance of mass organisations) in Metro Manila's District 2, a big urban poor community. The military started interviewing the local leaders about why they had been involved in a demonstration against water privatisation that day and asked where one of the local leaders lived.

The military then established an ongoing camp in the community to film political activities and seek the names and addresses of organisers.

A second incident occurred on December 29. The military barged into the office of the Kongreso ng Pagkakaisa ng Maralita ng Lunsod (Unity Congress of the Urban Poor) in the community of Sarangay demanding lists of KPML members and leaders. The military set up a permanent detachment in the community.

Union offices of the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP — Solidarity of Filipino Workers) have also been visited by the military in full battle gear.

The military has also been prepared to enter the gated communities of the upper-middle class to hunt down activists. Sanlakas coordinator Rasti Delizo has not been able to live at home for 12 months because the military were visiting his home in a middle-class area daily looking for him.

Law changes

As well as using paramilitary death squads and military harassment, the Arroyo government has introduced a series of anti-democratic executive orders and laws, and has dusted off Marcos-era laws and re-using them.

One example is the Calibrated Preemptive Response (CPR) executive order, introduced in September 2005. It is based on the old Marcos-era "No permit, no rally" law #880. The CPR has led to a series of violent dispersals of demonstrations and rallies.

The old anti-subversion law is being revived and Arroyo is trying to get an "anti-terrorism" law passed by congress. It is based on a similar law in the United States.

No official is allowed to testify before congress without permission from the president.

Human rights violations increased after Arroyo announced "all-out war" against Communist insurgency in 2005, and then the military announced its policy of "Freedom Watch". Killings and disappearances increased.

On February 24, 2006, Arroyo proclaimed the same law that was used by Marcos to declare martial law in 1981.

There are still 233 political prisoners languishing in jail, including some from the Marcos era.

The priorities of the Arroyo government are reflected by the fact that in 2005, 1.13% of the national budget was spent on health compared to 5% for national "defence". The US is helping fund the government's "anti-terrorist" campaign.

New Zealand's government has condemned the state repression in the Philippines, but the Australian government has refused to.

P.S.

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