

Mindanao Activist Killings Probed

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Could murders of rights campaigners be linked to army crackdown on leftist rebels?

Witness testimony and other circumstantial evidence have raised suspicions that a recent spate of activist killings in Southern Mindanao may be related to the Philippine military's counter-insurgency programme.

Three organisers of the Bayan Muna (People First) political party – which advocates poor-friendly policies – and a fourth peasant activist have been killed here since early November.

All three Bayan Muna killings took place within 60 kilometres of each other in Compostela Valley and the neighbouring province of Davao del Norte.

The latest victim, Bayan Muna organiser Isabelino Celeng, 47, died in Tagum City hospital in Davao on December 6, six days after being shot and wounded in the town of Monkayo.

A week before his killing, a farm activist was gunned down outside Davao. Two weeks earlier, two more Bayan Muna workers were shot dead in separate incidents.

Danilo Qualbar, 48, was the first to die, on November 6. His killing and the authorities' response to it seems sadly typical: there was no outrage, no real investigation, no autopsy. There was only a simple eulogy delivered in the Compostela town gym attended by his family and friends.

Three weeks after he was gunned down at a quiet crossroads while riding home to his wife and six children, the police had still to interview his family.

And when the Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project, PHRP, visited Compostela Valley, the police chief showed no real eagerness to do so.

"They live up in the hills and besides they don't want to talk to us," said Inspector Ali Dampac, chief of the Compostela municipality police force, when asked why the police had yet to see them.

Qualbar was shot dead at Osmena crossroads at around 5.30 pm. The intersection is a ten-minute drive out of Compostela town.

According to witness Henry Balasag, 20, whose home overlooks the spot where Qualbar died, a gunman on a red XRM motorbike pulled up alongside him and shot him four times in the stomach with a handgun.

The killer wore a cap, blue jacket and gray knee-length shorts, according to Balasag, who says the police failed to interview him. They did, however, take a statement from his mother who also witnessed the killing. A copy of her statement was given to PHRP by the police.

Balasag said his first reaction was to run to where Qualbar lay dying, but was warned back by his mother. The assailant was still waving the gun around as he tried to ride his motorbike which had toppled over during the shooting. Balasag says he did not get a clear look at the gunman's face because of the cap.

Three days after Qualbar was killed, on November 10, another local Bayan Muna organiser was shot dead in Davao del Norte as he answered his door to two gunmen.

Rolando Antolihao, 39, a banana plantation worker and Bayan Muna member, was killed around 6 pm in front of his wife and two-year-old daughter in the municipality of Kapitalong, less than 20 km from Tagum City. He was shot seven times according to human rights group Karapatan which visited the isolated scene of the killing the following day.

Two weeks later, a third activist was killed in similar circumstances in Davao City.

A fourth activist, Isabelino Celing, 47, died on December 6 in Tagum City Hospital, six days after being shot by a gunman in Monkayo. The gunman also reportedly rode a red XRM motorbike.

Celing was the second Bayan Muna worker to be killed in Monkayo town in just four months.

The first was Roel Dotarot, 33, who was shot dead on August 15 by two gunmen wearing ski masks. The gunmen were also seen beside an XRM bike by witnesses. The colour of that bike has not been reported.

POLICE DISMISS POLITICAL MOTIVE

Compostela is a rural municipality of 70,000 people in Compostela Valley which is dominated by extensive banana plantations and rice fields from which it generates most of its income. The town itself is little more than a dusty settlement of basic stores, bakeries and diners separated by overgrown lots. Yet it attracts people from the surrounding hills where the roads have yet to reach.

According to Inspector Dampac, Qualbar was a "pure businessman" and was probably killed over a debt or a deal gone bad. The motive for Qualbar's killing, the police seemed to be suggesting, was anything but political. "He was not a member of any group," he told PHRP

This was also the claim of national task forces assigned to investigate extra-judicial killings.

In a phone interview, Major Henry Libay, secretariat member of the Philippine police's Task Force Usig, said Qualbar, Antolihao and Dotarot were not members of Bayan Muna or any other left-leaning group.

Task Force Usig was formed in May 2006 to investigate incidents of slain party list members, activists and media practitioners.

“We have affidavits of the victims’ families, neighbours, village leaders and even the local elections commissions saying that the victims were not members of Bayan Muna. The group claims they are their members but could not present any documents proving such,” Libay said.

He says that since they do not fall under the mandate of Task Force Usig, the cases are relegated to the local police for resolution, classified as murder or homicide cases.

Justice undersecretary Ricardo Blancaflor, who heads Task Force 211, suggested to PHRP that the victims may have been killed due what he said was their involvement in mining operations in the area, not because of their political affiliations. “They have their businesses, too,” he said.

Formed by the president on November 2006, Task Force 211 is officially mandated to “harness and mobilise” government agencies, civil society, and the public to prevent, investigate and prosecute political violence.

The task forces’ claims are flatly contradicted by Qualbar’s widow Aurelia, Karapatan, and by a local member of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP or the Philippine Peasant Movement).

As well as being the local coordinator of Bayan Muna, Qualbar was also the information officer of the KMP-affiliated Compostela Farmers Association according to these same three sources.

If Qualbar was indeed a businessman or a miner, he was not a very successful one. His house is found a tough one hour off-road drive up high in the hills in the tiny hamlet of Sitio Nursery in Barangay Ngan. His home was a wooden shack on stilts decorated only by a large poster of Britney Spears. The ground below is clearly visible between gaps in the floorboards.

With quiet determination in her voice, Qualbar’s widow insists her husband’s death followed on from and was directly related to a local radio report she heard announcing the army was launching “clean-up operations” after an October 24 clash between the military and the communist New People’s Army, NPA, in nearby New Bataan town.

Compostela Valley is a known stronghold of the NPA and a key focus for the Philippine military’s campaign Oplan Bantay Laya 2, the publicly declared government attempt to end the long-running communist insurgency by 2010.

Aurelia Qualbar insists her husband was never an NPA member, but had been a frequent participant in “anti-militarisation rallies” in both New Bataan and in Davao.

“I know who killed him,” she said.

“On November 1, a week before he was shot, he came home and told me he had been identified out loud by two military intelligence officers as he passed [an army] checkpoint near here. I told him that his life was in danger and that he should leave.

“When he passed by the soldiers, he told me, one of the men there had called out ‘that one’.”

Compostela police said they had “no idea about any threats made at any checkpoints” and “could not say the AFP (army) are suspects”.

According to Aurelia Qualbar, the same day, in the morning, she had seen two soldiers drinking across from her house in the general store.

She maintains she never saw them again after November 1.

But she does claim family friends spotted another “military-looking” man “following her husband and texting” somebody outside Kings Bakery in Compostela town, moments before Danilo climbed onboard his bike for his fateful ride home.

She believes the man was texting an accomplice – possibly the gunman.

Colonel Alan Luga, commander-in-chief of the 1001st Infantry Brigade in Compostela province, insists the army was in no way connected to the killing of Qualbar.

“If people have evidence, let us see it,” he told PHRP in Tagum City.

According to the colonel, orders, discipline and full awareness of and adherence to human rights law ensure that extra-judicial killings simply do not happen in the army.

“It is well known that Karapatan and Bayan Muna are civilian fronts for the NPA,” he said, “but as long as they stick to the law, we do not go after them.

“Even NPA members are safe, unless actively involved in armed combat. The only legitimate targets are armed groups.

“We must be legal, we must do good.”

SECURITY FORCE RESPONSE “WHOLLY WRONG”

Colonel Luga admitted the army did have a problem in winning the hearts and minds of some people in the region and needed to do more. He also maintained Compostela Valley had the highest number of NPA insurgents in the country, but that their numbers and threat were slowly declining.

“They are getting weaker,” he said. “The problem is they are targeting and recruiting youngsters – not

necessarily believers, but those with a sense of adventure who have no jobs and nothing to do.

“I’ve been here just six months and I have seen a lot of incidents.”

But Bayan Muna party list representative Satur Ocampo told PHRP that the reactions of the military and police to the killings were wholly predictable – and wholly wrong.

“They should take heed the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial killing that the president should instruct all military commanders to stop denigrating or labeling legal organisations,” Ocampo said.

He also pointed out the government’s failure to heed recommendation by the Melo Commission to investigate retired army general Jovito Palparan, implicated in the disappearances of activists in central and southern Luzon. Palparan denies the charges.

The five-man commission was formed in August 2006 to probe killings of activists and journalists and was headed by former Supreme Court Associate Justice and current elections commission chair Jose Melo.

“It would be fruitless for the families of victims and human rights organisations to present their cases to Task Force Usig given the bias it has shown from the very start,” Ocampo said.

PHRP met Colonel Luga in Tagum City a few days after the NPA released video footage taken of Lieutenant Vicente Cammayo who is being held captive by the NPA after it siezed him during a recent clash between the military and the communist guerrillas.

Cammayo’s wife Mariel, who is six months pregnant, recently appeared on television appealing for his release. Like the military, the NPA have been accused of their own human rights abuses including extra-judicial killings.

The NPA, which has promised to release Cammayo before Christmas, also recently “apologised” for the killing of a five-year-old girl, Kyle Manegro, who was shot during its attack on the military.

Colonel Luga dismissed claims that death squads were operating within the military.

According to Davao City police in a statement released a week ago, there have been over 200 killings between January and October this year, many reportedly petty criminals or victims of robberies.

But human rights groups like Karapatan insist there have also been a spate of political killings directly related to Oplan Bantay Laya 2.

However, it is a claim they cannot substantiate.

Kelly Delgado, secretary general of Karapatan South Mindanao Region, says his group only travels into Compostela Valley in teams of 20 to 30 strong.

“It is a high militarised zone and it is not safe for us to go there alone or even in small groups,” he said from his first floor office in Davao City, inside a church compound.

According to a Karapatan map and report prepared at the scene of the Antolihao killing, two gunmen were dropped by a third accomplice on a motorcycle at the entrance to a thick banana grove and walked up to his house, knocking at the door and claiming to be his neighbour.

Karapatan claimed the gunmen would have passed directly in front of Guadalupe Chapel and a small army camp, just 50 m from the victim’s house, according to the map.

Colonel Luga confirmed that the army’s standing orders require soldiers to immediately respond to any shooting incidents. According to Karapatan, however, the soldiers in Kapalong remained at their post.

“It was early evening and it is a very quiet and isolated place,” Delgado said. “It is impossible that they did not hear the shooting.”

According to a police report filed on November 11 by senior officer Jose Tanduyan of the Kapalong police, the crime scene “was already totally altered and contaminated due to the presence of several curious persons”.

The police report said the motive for the killing “is still to be ascertained”.

The police recovered several .45 bullet casings and one “deformed 0.45 slug”, according to their own report. Karapatan also claimed a 0.45 calibre pistol was used to kill Qualbar - though no documentary evidence was provided.

Less than two weeks after the Antolihao killing, on November 22, three unidentified men interrupted an evening meeting of farming activists in Paquibato District just outside Davao City, then shot and killed Vicente Paglinawan, vice-president of Pambansang Kilusan ng Samahang Magsasaka, a national confederation of 28 local peasant and farmers’ groups.

Delgado said that his group was still trying to investigate that incident. He says he himself received a death threat after publicising the killing of well-known local activist and peasant leader Celso Pojas in May this year.

Delgado was one of the first to arrive on the scene after Pojas, KMP secretary-general was gunned down in front of his office, located less than two km from Karapatan’s own modest headquarters.

Pojas was reportedly preparing to go to Compostela the following day and had allegedly received a series

of death threats before his killing. He was a highly vocal critic of the army and its operations in the valley.

Delgado, who took a series of photos of the body and drafted the initial report into Pojas' killing, claims he in turn started receiving death threats the following day after appearing on a radio show in Kidapawan City to talk about the case.

The threats were relayed to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Free Expression, Ambayi Ligabo. Subsequently, the UN sent letters to both the Philippine foreign ministry and Davao City police, which resulted in Delgado being called into the headquarters there on August 1 and offered police protection.

"The [threats] accused Karapatan of being a front for the NPA and said I would be the next one to be eliminated," Delgado said. "They said that was what was wrong with NPA supporters. If something happens to the NPA they immediately blame the soldiers, but if a soldier dies, they don't speak out. They said I was already six feet under the ground."

Despite the threats, Delgado rejected the offer of police protection.

"Nobody would talk to us freely if we turned up with a policeman," he said. "We couldn't do our job like that."

At the same time, Delgado takes the threats seriously, as Karapatan's policies for traveling into Compostela Valley suggest. He also claims the group in Davao is being monitored by people in a black 4 x 4 Lancer with the license plate PPN 665.

"It follows us around - especially when we have events like pickets or assemblies," he said. "We don't know who is inside it as we are afraid to go up and knock on the window."

Given the recent spate of killings, Karapatan members may have good reason to be both cautious and alarmed - both for themselves and for the communities and people they claim to be serving.

Regardless of whether Karapatan and like-minded groups are linked in some way to the NPA, there's a pattern of sorts to the killings - and it is a pattern that demands investigation.

None of the local police forces have clear descriptions of the killers, but they do have all the spent bullet casings and so can examine whether the same gun was used in two or more of the shootings. That, in itself, would point to some kind of conspiracy: even if tests came back negative, it would at least show the authorities were taking the series of incidents seriously.

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