

## **Philippines: Army's Human Rights PR Unconvincing**

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When the microphones are unplugged, the TV crews ushered out and the doors all closed, what do Philippine army chiefs really say about human rights?

When it comes to human rights, the public relations face of the military in the Philippines appears to be an attractive one. The Armed Forces of the Philippines, AFP, seems to conduct training and seminars on the issue. It produces glossy magazines that are reportedly circulated to the rank-and-file. It even now has its own human rights department within General Headquarters in Quezon City. I visited it six months ago when the builders were still in finishing the paintwork.

Admittedly, the department was in the basement of a hard-to-find building and very few people were actually in there working – but you can't always have everything. Things at least appeared to be starting to happen.

Some cynics put it down to the pressure the international community had started exerting in 2006/7. I try to keep an open mind.

The concern of many is that the public relations face may be the only thing the military actually has to show when it comes to human rights. Peel that away and what is left? What is happening behind the new paintwork at the GHQ? Maybe it is a mask behind which lies nothing. No understanding, no belief, no actual commitment.

So can we make out any pattern or consistency in recent AFP behaviour that allows us to determine whether we are really seeing an improvement – or are we victims of public relations gimmickry that seeks to hide that nothing has really changed within the heart and minds of the military when it comes to the issues of human rights and the rule of law?

Unfortunately, recent examples suggest that behind closed doors army generals are just not serious.

A recent report in the Philippine newspaper the *Inquirer* highlighted this for me in a simple way.

According to the *Inquirer*, the Commission on Human Rights, CHR, was recently denied visiting rights to soldiers who were detained after the foiled coup of 2006. The CHR team included several members from the House of Representatives.

Despite the CHR being a body established by the government and with a constitutional right to visit prisoners, it was denied access to soldiers being held at Camp Bonifacio.

According to the *Inquirer*, which quoted CHR head Leila De Lima, no less a person than the commanding officer of the Philippine Marine Corps Headquarters Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Iuminado Lumakad, turned back the CHR on the basis of “written orders”.

If the report is true, and there is little to suggest otherwise, it begs the question who is really in charge and what the rule of law means.

The CHR was denied its constitutional right through “written orders” passed down to a lieutenant-colonel. Lest we forget, in the army hierarchy, a lieutenant- colonel stands above a major. This was not then a refusal handed out by a fickle camp guard who knew no better.

Though some may dismiss it is a minor issue, others see it as indicative of a far bigger problem.

The fact is surely that in a real democracy, the army cannot pick and choose which laws to observe and which to ignore.

The CHR story put me in mind of the plight of Erlinda Cadapan as told to viewers of ABS-CBN News Channel’s Media In Focus programme back in June of this year.

Cadapan is the mother of missing university student Sherlyn. Both Sherlyn and another University of the Philippines student Karen Empeno were reportedly last seen alive inside a military camp in Bataan run by the 24th Infantry Battalion two years ago.

Cadapan, who had never given up looking for her daughter, explained to the TV audience how she has been repeatedly turned away at gunpoint by members of the military while seeking entry to camps where Sherlyn and others have been held. Meantime, as far as I am aware, the military are still not cooperating in the case of missing activist Jonas Burgos who was also abducted by military agents, according to eyewitnesses.

The list of missing people thought to have been abducted by the military we could refer to is a long one – and perhaps we should continually do so until we see something akin to real change happening.

The story about the CHR being denied its constitutional right to visit military prisoners begs the question why and what else is being hidden from us?

The CHR story was published the same day as it was reported that no action would be taken against air force pilots said to be responsible for the deaths of six civilians in Datu Piang, Maguindanao on September 8.

Nobody who has seen photos of the dead children can be left unmoved and the incident seems to have uncanny parallels to that of the Maimbung incident in Sulu in February where civilians in a pump boat were also killed in the course of a military campaign.

According to the AFP on both accounts, internal army investigations reportedly found that the civilians in Maimbung and Datu Piang were caught in crossfire during legitimate military encounters. The accounts of crossfire have been denied by other eyewitnesses to both events.

It is neither right nor fair to simply believe one account over the other from such a distance. But it is wholly right and fair that the military publish their own investigations so they may be examined properly by all. I said as much back in February to the new head of the AFP human rights department that publication of the internal army investigation into Maimbung might help persuade some people that the military are indeed serious about human rights.

My request was reportedly passed on to Western Mindanao Command, but nothing happened. Unfortunately that and all instances since seem to form part of a pattern. I wish it otherwise, but if the military wants people -including the international community and its representatives - to believe it is at all serious about human rights, we need to start seeing some real evidence. Glossy magazines, public statements, new departments and written commitments are simply not enough.

We will more than happily report here the good examples and instances of where the Philippine military is really working to improve its human rights record.

First though, we need to start hearing of some.

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