

Security Force Reforms Under Scrutiny

Author: [Claire Delfin](#)

Police and military say they have set out to improve their human rights record, but evidence so far is slim. As activists continue to assail the Philippine government over its human rights record, the military and the police insist the tide is now turning and they are instituting real reform.

Over the years, the police have been accused of unlawful arrests, violating the rights of suspects, extortion, beatings and a host of other crimes that have led some to brand them “hoodlums in uniform”.

Senior Superintendent Lina Sarmiento, head of the Human Rights Affairs Office of the Philippine National Police, PNP, said, “This is exactly the kind of image that we would like to change.”

With the help of the Commission on Human Rights, CHR, the PNP has embarked on a programme that it hopes will transform the police force over time into a more capable, effective and credible organisation.

Sarmiento’s office was born out of a desire and pressure –including international pressure – to see change. Training and workshop sessions aim to improve general understanding and adherence to human rights standards within the force.

And human rights desks have reportedly been set up in police stations across the country – which citizens supposedly approach to file grievances, including complaints about policemen.

Disciplinary procedures abusive policemen have also reportedly been strengthened. “You can just send us a text message about your complaints, and we can act on it,” said Sarmiento.

These efforts have been given added impetus by the declaration of the new PNP chief, Jesus Versoza, to make the PNP more human rights compliant. He has banned, for example, the usual police practice of presenting suspects to the media.

Like the PNP, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, AFP, too now has a human rights office. The military is also reportedly introducing training sessions and workshops on human rights issues including instruction on the Geneva conventions.

“We have actively strengthened awareness on human rights issues within the military and even in our communities,” said Lieutenant Colonel. Ernesto Torres, an AFP spokesperson.

The military have been widely blamed over the years by activists and international monitors and groups alike of involvement in a whole series of extra-judicial killings and disappearances. Torres though denies that the state has ever had a policy of using the AFP to kill and abduct people deemed to be subversive and linked to the communist New People’s Army, NPA.

Torres says since the inception of the military human rights office last year, a number of human rights cases against soldiers and officers have been investigated and prosecuted.

In fact, he claims, there has been a significant decrease in the human rights cases filed against military personnel. The Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project, however, was unable to secure access to an army report into the killing of seven civilians during a military operation in Maimbung, Sulu earlier this year.

Nevertheless, recent developments have led CHR chairperson Leila de Lima to claim that human rights have “become the language of the time”.

This, even as she concedes that the CHR has actually been a “toothless tiger” and has been refused entry to military jails despite the constitutional powers granted to it.

The military has been directly accused of involvement in more than a handful of alleged extra-judicial killings and disappearances. Beyond flat statements denying it is in any way responsible for them, the army still refuses to cooperate fully into investigations into missing people, such as activist Jonas Burgos and University of the Philippines students Karen Empeno and Sherlyn Cadapan. The two girls were reportedly last seen alive being raped and tortured inside a military barracks by a fellow detainee.

For her part, De Lima laments the fact her group lacks its own forensic centre that will make its investigative and monitoring powers more credible. “Imagine that we have to rely on the findings provided by the same people we are trying to investigate. It is quite absurd,” she said in a separate press statement.

Both Torres and Sarmiento are one with De Lima in admitting that the government’s human rights programme is still in its infancy, and will definitely take a while before it matures.

“The way the police interact with the citizens is based on individual value systems. Even if we train them, they already have their own set of values, so it’s really impossible to make changes overnight,” said Sarmiento.

Torres says the job should not be left to the CHR, the police and the military, as it requires conscious effort too from society, which needs to be vigilant against human rights violations.

Professor Miriam Coronel Ferrer of the Political Science Department of the University of the Philippines, however, says that before the government can win over the public, it must first show it is indeed committed to uphold human rights.

Ferrer says that had President Gloria Arroyo not been pressured by the international community, Malacañang Palace would not have formed the Melo Commission and the PNP’s Task Force Usig to investigate extra-judicial killings.

The five-man commission was formed in August 2006 to probe the killings of journalists and activists, with Supreme Court Associate Justice and current Commission on Elections chair Jose Melo as head.

“The pressure of the international community was so high that the president was compelled to do it. But there was no serious attempt to prosecute and hold accountable those implicated,” said Ferrer who is also lead convener of human rights monitoring group Sulong (forward).

“The president must ensure there will be elections in 2010 and that electoral reforms are seriously put in place so that the people’s right to vote is protected.”

She says that unless people, especially vulnerable groups, feel their rights are being protected and the elections are truly free and fair, then all talk about a new climate of human rights will remain precisely that – just talk.

Claire Delfin is a television news reporter for the GMA Network.

Location: Mindanao
Philippines

Focus: Philippines Rights
Reporting

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/security-force-reforms-under-scrutiny>