

# Murder, She Wrought

## Political Killings in the Philippines



*Death came to them in identical and methodical manner.*

*On July 31, 2006, two political activists and a news photographer were gunned down in different parts of the country, prompting media to label this day as "Bloody Monday."*

*Alice Omengan-Claver, Bayan Muna coordinator in Northern Luzon was shot dead aboard her family's vehicle in Kalinga; Rei Mon Guran, League of Filipino Students (LFS) provincial spokesperson was killed while riding a passenger bus in Sorsogon; and Prudencio "Dick" Melendres of "Tanod" tabloid was on his way to work when gunmen caught up with him in Malabon.*

*On the morning of September 7, 2006, hitmen struck again with impunity, killing a leftist leader, a former local official, and an election official. A major newspaper later called this day as "bloody Thursday morn."*

*Former Gov. Danilo Parilla was shot while disembarking with his family from an inter-island vessel in Cebu City; Victor Olayvar, Bohol Bayan Muna officer, was murdered on a bridge in Danao town; and Comelec provincial supervisor Julius Angadol was killed while driving his car in Luna, Apayao.*

**T**HESE KILLINGS were just but a few of the hundreds recorded since President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (PGMA) assumed office in 2001. Based on the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)



tally, there were 264 militants and 49 journalists killed during this period while the human rights group Karapatan records a much higher figure of 725.

According to the data of the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), there have been 103 victims, 95 male and 8 female, of extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary execution since 2001.

Meanwhile, a Canadian human rights team which conducted a fact-finding mission in the country stated that political killings reached their highest level in 2006 since the ouster of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The team documented

180 cases or an average of three killings every week.

This is close to Karapatan's tally which reached 185 cases for 2006.

The victims came from all walks of life: students, farmers, workers, academe, tricycle drivers, urban poor, religious people, professionals, etc., and from different age groups, ranging from the youth to the elderly. But they shared something in common: they are staunch government critics and most of them belong to political groups which the military tagged as "communist front organizations."

While it is true that summary killings have really intensified in the last two years, the brazenness of the liquidations that happened in 2006 such as the "Bloody Monday" and "bloody Thursday morn" finally drew the attention of the international human rights community particularly of the United Nations, Amnesty International (AI), and the European Union.

**In its final report completed in January 2007, the Melo commission, which was tasked by President Arroyo to look into the series of political killings in the country, tagged Major General Jovito Palparan and other military commanders as liable for these atrocities by virtue of command responsibility.**

**The probe body also confirmed that most of the victims were "leftist-activist-militants" and that majority of the suspected perpetrators were from the ranks of the military.**

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Even business leaders expressed concerns that the series of assassinations and the climate of fear and instability it was creating might drive away investments and hurt the economy.

These were reactions the GMA administration could not afford to ignore.

## Amnesty International Report

In its August 2006 report, AI concluded that the killings of activists in the Philippines were not just random acts of violence but were politically motivated, occurring within the larger context of the on-going anti-insurgency campaign of the government.

AI expressed grave concern over “credible reports that members of the security forces have been directly involved in the attacks, or else have tolerated, acquiesced to, or been complicit in them.”

The organization documented 51 cases of extrajudicial executions in the first half of 2006 alone, a figure already close to the 66 killings it listed for the entire 2005.

The London-based human rights group stated that these killings should be a “deep source of embarrassment” to the Philippine government and that clearly, it failed to protect the lives of its citizens and their rights of political expression and association.

AI also warned of the possibility that those responsible for these killings would have come to believe that they had received implied official approval for these human rights violations with the pervading climate of impunity which in practice translates to non-prosecution of perpetrators.

Apparently the group was also referring to the State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Arroyo last July wherein she condemned political killings but also praised Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan for his outstanding achievements in the government’s anti-insurgency drive. Palparan has been tagged as the ‘butcher’ of leftist activists for the spate of extrajudicial executions and other rights abuses that escalate in areas where he happened to be



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assigned.

Among the recommendations of the said report were the following: a) ensure chain of command control in the military, b) actions against these 'death squads,' and c) independent probe of the Deputy Ombudsman for the Military, other law enforcement agencies, and the Commission on Human Rights.

It also urged the Philippine government to make use of the existing United Nations mechanisms specifically by inviting the UN Special Rapporteurs on Extrajudicial Executions, the Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, and representatives of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to visit the country.

The AI report was followed by declarations of concern from the diplomatic community especially from the members of the European Union over the unresolved and unchecked killings of journalists and militants.

The issue also haunted President Arroyo during her Europe trip in September to participate in the Asia-Europe Meeting in Helsinki. Filipinos in Europe staged pickets and European officials and civil society members questioned her about human rights abuses in the Philippines.

## The Melo Commission

In a move to cool down the heat generated by the pressure from the international human rights community, GMA formed the Melo Commission on August 21 to investigate these killings, bring the culprits to justice, and "break this cycle of violence once and for all."

President Arroyo stated that she created the commission to show her "determination to stop extrajudicial killings" and that the probe body would be "powerful, credible, and fully independent."

Headed by former Supreme Court justice Jose Melo, the five-member probe body started its inquiry on September 11 by summoning and interviewing top officials of the military. The commission was

expected to finish its task by December and come up with its final report on January 2007.

But even before the commission could begin its work, human rights and political groups expressed doubts on its capability to conduct an impartial and effective investigation.

According to former vice-president Teofisto Guingona, it is a "toothless tiger without the power to subpoena, without the power to protect." He added that it only showed that the move to create the commission was only for show.

Max de Mesa, chairperson of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) and one of the convenors of the Citizen's Council for Human Rights (CCHR), wondered how the government expects the witnesses to come out and testify when they fear retribution from the police and the military.

Critics also questioned the commission's composition, specifically the inclusion of Chief State prosecutor Jovencito Zuño and National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) Director Nestor Mantaring, who were both from the Department of Justice under the Office of the President.

Even Melo himself admitted that there could be problems regarding the protection of the witnesses since those accused, the police and the military, were the ones supposed to protect those invited to testify.

He further recognized that there could also be difficulties in summoning both the accused and the witnesses since the probe body has no contempt powers even if it has the mandate to subpoena.

However, Melo was quite optimistic that parties in the inquiry would be cooperative and respectful of the commission since it was created by the President.

Early October, Sen. Aquilino Pimentel pointed out that the probe body got to a wrong start by talking to the leaders of the military first and not to the witnesses and relatives of victims of these killings.



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According to him, this would 'give an impression' that the commission was putting more credence on the military's claim that the leftist movement was behind the killings.

Sen. Pimentel also complained that the investigation was 'getting nowhere' and that he would not be surprised if nothing would come out of the process due to the limitations in the mandate of the Melo commission.

## Accusations

Earlier, the left quickly pointed an accusing finger at the military as the perpetrators of these grisly killings with the silent blessings of government leaders. A primer published by the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) alleged that extrajudicial killings have taken on a national character since 2005 and that these were part of Arroyo's all-out war against the progressive movement dubbed as "Operation Bantay Laya."

The police countered that it was the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its New People's Army (NPA) under "Operational Plan: Bushfire" that masterminded 36% of the killings of activists. According to police intelligence, most of the victims were accused of engaging in "counterrevolutionary" activities or embezzling organizational funds.

Military officials added that Oplan Bushfire was a "hitting-two-birds-with-one-stone" plan, in which the rebels could purge their ranks and later on put the blame on the military and put the government in a tight spot before the international community.

The trade of accusations from both warring parties was expected but what tilted the balance against the government and the military's innocence was the take on the issue of independent observers like Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) columnist Amando Doronila and peace advocate and UP professor Miriam Coronel Ferrer.

It was Ferrer who articulated the suspicion of many people, that these assassinations of militants could never be considered as random acts of violence but could be part of a classified national

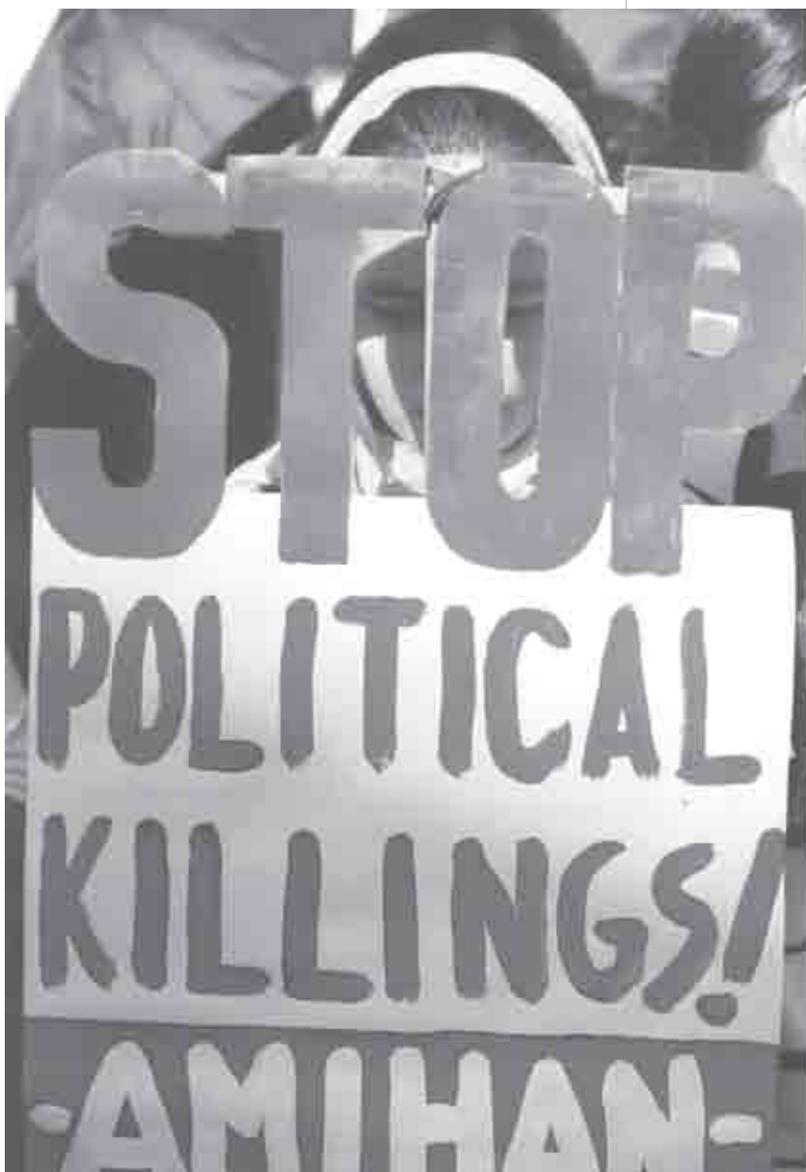
**Uphold the**

**RIGHT** to life  
to live

**Stop trade union repression!**  
**Stop the killings!**

**-EMJP-**







policy sanctioned by the higher-ups through mere inaction or worse, complicity.

Doronila was more forthright in his claim that the killings of activists could be linked to Oplan Bantay Laya, the government's 'holistic' anti-insurgency strategy adopted in 2002 and reinforced in June 2006 with the President's announcement of an all-out war against the communists.

The columnist further revealed that a Bantay Laya document obtained by his paper listed target "sectoral front groups" known to be affiliated with the CPP struggle. According to him, an Inquirer source further revealed that Bantay Laya papers used the term "neutralize, a term implicitly understood by the underworld of Philippine politics as a go-ahead for death squad assassinations."

He added that this information was corroborated by pronouncements of top government officials like National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales who condemned legal organizations as "communist legal fronts," and Justice Secretary Raul Gonzales who said that these killings were "necessary collateral damage" in the war against the insurgents.

## Oplan Bantay Laya

Military documents described Bantay Laya as a 'holistic approach' against the communist insurgency mobilizing both civilian and military agencies to foster good governance, win over public confidence in government, ease poverty and establish a secure environment conducive to development.

Sources also revealed that the plan aims to "directly address" the threats posed by the Communist Party of the Philippines and its army, the NPA, "through clearing and holding operations and programs to defend communities, protect the people and secure vital installations and national assets."

But as Doronila pointed out, Bantay Laya was a blueprint of war designed not to engage the NPA militarily but to decimate its civilian supporters and activists whom they suspect to be maintaining ties

with the underground. Thus the upsurge in the killings of political activists allegedly perpetrated by paramilitary death squads.

He also lambasted Bantay Laya as being too heavy on the military side with the redeployment of troops from Mindanao to areas in Luzon where the guerilla fronts are still actively operating.

With the entry of Gen. Palparan in the picture, the most rabid anti-communist among President Arroyo's top military men, Oplan Bantay Laya meant to win the hearts and minds of the people turned into nightmare for civilians in Central Luzon where the controversial general was assigned.

No heroic deeds of soldiers were heard while they were supposed to be "defending the people from the enemies" but instead tales of abuses and terror abound especially in Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, Pampanga, Tarlac, and Zambales provinces.

In most of the communities in these provinces, it was not an atmosphere of peace that pervaded but of fear and anxiety as soldiers imposed martial law-like rules such as curfews, conduct of house-to-house searches, and checking of civilians' resident tax certificates or 'cedulas' (those who could not produce one were either physically abused or "invited for questioning" in military camps).

There were also reports of teen-agers being beaten, tortured, and kidnapped. A popular TV show also featured a case wherein a suspected communist sympathizers' house was burned down in Bulacan. And of course, 'salvagings,' local coinage for summary killings, and forced disappearances of activists in these areas became rampant.

Despite these, the military leadership claimed that Bantay Laya was very effective and that the government was winning in its anti-insurgency campaign and in fact, was about to deliver the final blow that will, once and for all, eradicate the communist threat.

In the latter part of 2006, the government was on the verge of adopting Oplan Bantay Laya II to finally 'crush' the New People's



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Army (NPA) and its political center, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

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The political crisis spawned by the 'Hello Garci' controversy over allegations of massive fraud during the 2004 presidential elections reached its zenith in February 2006 when President Arroyo declared a state of national emergency to squash the so-called "left and right" conspiracy to grab power and undermine democracy.

When the smoke cleared, with the Arroyo regime still standing, the government went on a full-scale offensive against the 'enemies of the state.' Critical media outfits were either shut down or threatened, rebel soldiers and officers were jailed and tried; legislators from progressive party list groups were arrested or harassed and consistently linked to underground organizations; and lastly, an all-out war against the communist rebels was declared.

Thus, the unsheathing of the full might of Bantay Laya with Maj. Gen. Palparan acting as the government's most exemplary anti-communist champion. The government propaganda machinery also began to revive the old red scare tactics and exaggerated the security threats posed by the insurgents.

But Bantay Laya, for all its rhetoric of saving democracy and protecting the people from the scourge of communism was essentially a scheme to literally eliminate Arroyo's opponents.

Actually, the more serious peril to the GMA administration was the restive young military officers; but of course she would not dare wage an open war against them since they are still part of the mighty institution that – as recent history has proven – could save or topple a presidency.

Anyway, the President in her SONA in July set a "moving on" tone and emphasized the bright prospect of economic growth if the people will rally to her side in battling obstacles to development, foremost of which is the long-running leftist rebellion in the country.

Remember, this was also the same occasion wherein GMA, despite her condemnation of the rash of killings of activists, heaped lavish praise on Palparan for his anti-insurgency accomplishments.

To recognize, much more commend on a policy-setting speech a top military official suspected of masterminding these atrocities was simply unthinkable. It was like a master telling his rabid dog, "go on, bite my enemies, I won't punish you."

This largely explains the reigning culture of impunity on political killings with only three cases reaching the courts and none having been resolved out of the hundreds of actual incidents. And besides, what kind of justice could the victims and their relatives expect when Justice Secretary Gonzales himself had already exonerated security forces from criminal liability?

It might be impossible to establish direct accountability of the Commander-in-Chief over these unabated killings but it would also not suffice to say that the government's culpability mainly hinges on its failure to arrest this political violence.

Because somehow the President, in her desperate attempt to preserve her political life, had set the stage and encouraged if not directed these horrid crimes.

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