

UA 138/97

"Disappearance" / Fear of ill-treatment

9 May 1997

PHILIPPINES Romeo Cortez, peasant leader, aged 48

Amnesty International has just learned that peasant leader Romeo Cortez has not been seen since being abducted at around 6.30pm on 1 April 1997 in San Roque, Mexico, Pampanga province. The organization is extremely concerned for his safety.

Romeo Cortez' abductors, three unidentified armed men in a vehicle, appeared to have been lying in wait for him as he was on his way home. Romeo Cortez' male companion, who witnessed the abduction, went immediately to report the incident to Romeo Cortez' family. Later that evening, the victim's father sought assistance from Vice Mayor Espino of Sta. Ana, Mexico, who advised him to go to the local municipal hall. Romeo Cortez' brother then went to the municipal hall where he was reportedly told by the local Chief of Police that the reason for the abduction was unclear.

According to information gathered by the human rights organization *Karapatan*, local people believe that Romeo Cortez' activities as a leader and organizer of a local peasants' alliance are the real motive for his abduction and "disappearance".

Romeo Cortez' family has reportedly visited the local army headquarters at Camp Olivas but have not been able to obtain any information as to his whereabouts.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the early 1970s over 1,600 people, most of them alleged critics or opponents of successive governments, are reported to have "disappeared" in the Philippines. Despite clear and substantive evidence implicating state security personnel in these "disappearances", in the overwhelming majority of cases the whereabouts and fate of the victims remains unknown, the suspected perpetrators have not been brought to justice and the families of the victims have not received redress.

The majority of past "disappearances" occurred within a context of armed conflict and counter-insurgency campaigns under the governments of former Presidents Ferdinand Marcos (1965-86) and Corazon Aquino (1986-92). Most of the victims were members of legally-constituted student, labour, religious, political or human rights organizations which the authorities often claimed were fronts for the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing the New People's Army (NPA). Other victims were ordinary citizens from all sectors of society who had been critical, in a peaceful manner, of government or military policy.

Since President Ramos was elected in 1992 the number of reported "disappearances" has declined steadily as the scale and intensity of armed conflict has diminished. Amnesty International has welcomed this decline but continues to be concerned at the government's failure to resolve past cases of "disappearances", to confront the issue of impunity or to address the conditions which continue to allow periodic "disappearances" to take place today.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- calling on the authorities to immediately establish and make public the whereabouts of Romeo Cortez who was abducted on 1 April 1997 in San Roque, Mexico, Pampanga province;
- stating your concern that he may have been detained solely because of his lawful and non-violent activities as a peasant leader and if this is the case urging that he be released immediately; otherwise he should be charged promptly with a recognizable offence under existing laws;
- calling on the authorities to act immediately to guarantee his safety and well-being and, if he is in detention, to ensure that he is allowed access to his family and a lawyer of his choice;
- calling upon the authorities to cease the practice of arbitrary and incommunicado detention and to bring those responsible for these violations to justice before a civilian court.

APPEALS TO:

Note: Fax numbers checked 9/5/97. However, faxes to Philippines can be problematic at certain times. If unable to obtain fax tone, please try later.

President Fidel V. Ramos
Malacañang Palace
Manila
Philippines

Faxes: +63 2 832 3793 (via Dept of Foreign Affairs)

Telegrams: President Ramos, Manila, Philippines

Salutation: Dear President Ramos

Secretary Renato de Villa
Secretary of National Defense
Department of National Defense
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Metro Manila
Philippines

Faxes: +632 911 6213

Telegrams: Defense Secretary, Manila, Philippines

Salutation: Dear Secretary de Villa

General Arnulfo Acedera
Chief of Staff
Armed Forces of the Philippines
GHQ, Camp Emilio Aguinaldo
1110 Quezon City
Philippines

Faxes: +632 911 7783

Telegrams: Chief of Staff, Quezon City, Philippines

Salutation: Dear General Acedera

Secretary Robert Barbers
Secretary of the Interior and Local Government
PNCC Complex
Epifanio de los Santos Avenue
cnr Reliance Street
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Metro Manila

Philippines

Faxes: +632 631 8814 or +632 631 8830

Telegrams: Secretary of Interior, Manila, Philippines

Salutation: Dear Secretary Barbers

COPIES TO:

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and to diplomatic representatives of the Philippines accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 June 1997.