

PHILIPPINES Gaudencio Devaras, community organizer

Amnesty International has just learned of the "disappearance" of Gaudencio Devaras, a community organizer who was abducted by members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Purok Dabu, Sitio Mapalad, Zambales province on 12 July 1997. Since his abduction his relatives and friends have been unable to trace him. Amnesty International is gravely concerned for his safety.

Gaudencio Devaras was resting at a friend's house when the building was surrounded by a group of soldiers, believed to be members of the 68th Infantry Battalion of the AFP. According to eyewitnesses, Gaudencio Devaras was dragged from the house and forced to lie on the ground with his hands tied behind him.

In full view of his friend and his friend's grandchildren, the soldiers beat him in the stomach with a rifle butt and burned his tongue with lit cigarettes.

It is believed the soldiers were trying to force him to admit to being a member of the New People's Army, an armed opposition group. The soldiers then took him away by helicopter and he has not been seen since.

Local human rights groups have made inquiries at several police headquarters and army camps in the area in an attempt to locate Gaudencio Devaras, but officials have denied any knowledge of his arrest or whereabouts. An officer of the 68th Infantry Battalion also claimed that no military operations had taken place on 12 July. On 15 July an article in the *Philippine Star* newspaper reported that the Central Luzon Police Deputy for Administration had claimed that Gaudencio Devaras had been taken into custody. However when local human rights activists returned to the camps for more information, officials continued to deny holding him.

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 and its armed wing, the New People's Army. 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 establish immediately and make public the whereabouts of Gaudencio Devaras who was abducted on 12 July 1997 in Purok Dabu, Sitio Mapalad, Zambales province;
- urging that he either be released immediately or charged promptly with a recognizable offence under existing laws;
- calling on the authorities to act immediately to guarantee his safety and well-being and 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:

Please note: the following fax numbers are believed to be current. However you may experience problems getting a connection. If unable to obtain a fax tone, please try again 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
Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City
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 or 911 7708
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

Mandaluyong
Metro Manila
Philippines

Faxes: +632 631 8814 or +632 631 8830

Telegrams: Secretary of Interior, Manila, Philippines

Salutation: Dear Secretary Barbers

COPIES TO:

Aurora Navarrete-Reciña
Chairperson
Commission on Human Rights
IBP Building
Doña Julia Vargas Avenue
Pasig, Metro Manila
Philippines
Faxes: +63 2 631 6449

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 28 September 1997.