

PUBLIC

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Possible enforced disappearance

PHILIPPINES

James Balao (m), aged 47, indigenous rights activist

An activist for indigenous people's rights, James Balao, is believed to have been subjected to enforced disappearance. He set out by car from his home in Baguio City, in the northern part of Luzon island, on 17 September at 7am, to visit his family in the town of La Trinidad, a 30-minute drive. He sent them an SMS message to say he was on his way, but never arrived.

James Balao helped found the indigenous peoples' organization Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) in 1984. He has since worked as the CPA's researcher for issues such as indigenous peoples' rights, particularly land rights. As a member of a 1986 Constitutional Commission, he drafted provisions on indigenous peoples' rights in the 1986 Constitution.

He had told his family that he had been under regular surveillance since June, which had got more intense in the week before he disappeared. He described being tailed by a blue and white van wherever he went.

According to a reliable source, the army have James Balao on a secret list of senior members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in the Ilocos and Cordillera regions, and could have been detained as part of a government security operation called *Oplan Bantay Laya* (Freedom Watch Operation), which categorizes staff and volunteers of some NGOs as workers for "front organisations" supporting the CPP, its military arm, the New People's Army (NPA), or another communist organisation, the National Democratic Front of the Philippines.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

More than 1,600 people have been subjected to enforced disappearance in the Philippines since the 1970s. Local human rights group *Karapatan* reported 193 cases of enforced disappearance between January 2001 and March 2008.

This has mostly taken place during counter-insurgency operations against the NPA, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and other left-leaning or secessionist groups, and those seen to be political sympathizers of such groups have also been targeted.

An increasing number of political activists have been killed in the past decade, and the number of enforced disappearances has risen with it. The government has not resolved the cases of people who have been subjected to enforced disappearance or confronted the persistent climate of impunity, which together with weaknesses in legal and procedural safeguards protecting the rights of suspects and detainees, appears to be facilitating enforced disappearances.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Filipino, English or your own language:

- expressing your concern that James Balao, who has not been seen since 17 September, may have been subjected to enforced disappearance by the security forces;
- calling on the authorities to order a prompt and thorough investigation, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that all cases of extrajudicial execution and enforced disappearance are investigated promptly, impartially and effectively;
- calling on them to create an independent body to monitor these investigations.

APPEALS TO:

President

H.E. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo
Malacañang Palace,
JP Laurel St., San Miguel, Manila Philippines

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Salutation: Madame President

Secretary of Defence

Sec. Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr.
Department of National Defense
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Fax: +632 911 6213
Email: osnd@philonline.com
Salutation: Dear Secretary

Chief of Police

Chief Director General Jesus Verzosa.
Philippine National Police
Room 301 DND Building, Camp Emilio Aguinaldo,
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Fax: +632 7255115
Email: pio@pnp.gov.ph
Salutation: Dear Director General

COPIES TO:

Hon. Leila De Lima
Chairperson, Commission on Human Rights
SAAC Bldg., UP Complex
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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 October 2008.