

PUBLIC

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UA 258/04 "Disappearance"/fear for safety

02 September 2004

PHILIPPINES **Mario Detroz (m) aged 41**
Joseph Gonzales (m) aged 23
Ronaldo Comiso (m) age unknown

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of Joseph Gonzales, Mario Detroz and Ronaldo Comiso, all residents of Sampaloc district, in the capital Manila. They were reportedly arrested on 18 August by men believed to be members of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (ISAFP). They are feared to have "disappeared", as the authorities have denied any knowledge of their whereabouts.

Mario Detroz, Joseph Gonzales and Ronaldo Comiso are affiliated with the left-wing political party *Bayan Muna* (People First) and had all worked as party organizers during the May 2004 national elections, during which *Bayan Muna* won three Congressional seats. Joseph Gonzales and Ronaldo Comiso were also members of the Manila branch of BAYAN (New Patriotic Alliance) a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

According to reports, as the men drove through Sampaloc at around 5:00 pm, their car was blocked by a waiting vehicle. Around ten unidentified men surrounded the car, fired a warning shot and forced Joseph Gonzales to transfer to the other vehicle. Both vehicles were then driven off in a convoy of several other cars.

A local district official took the licence number of the assailant's vehicle and recorded the incident in a logbook. Bystanders were reportedly informed that the incident was related to an operation against suspected bank robbers.

When human rights activists and lawyers inquired after the men at a local police station, no record of the arrest had been made. However a police officer, while denying knowledge of an arrest, reportedly confirmed that he had been informed by ISAFP personnel that an 'operation' was underway in the area. The officer gave the name of an ISAFP Staff Sergeant reportedly involved in the operation, but continuing inquiries about the whereabouts of the three men have been unsuccessful.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Human rights violations, including "disappearances", extrajudicial executions and torture, continue to be reported periodically in relation to government anti-insurgency operations against the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Philippines Communist Party (CPP).

Those at risk of human rights violations include civilians – many from impoverished or indigenous communities – who are believed to be NPA 'sympathizers'. Also at risk are activist members of lawful political rights organizations and human rights groups which have been periodically labelled by military officials as "recruiters" or "fronts" for the NPA.

In the months leading up to the May 2004 national elections a series of reported extra-judicial executions by unidentified assailants took place. These included two *Bayan Muna* members on the island of Mindoro – Juvy Magsino, a human rights lawyer running for local Mayor, and Leyma Fortu a human rights worker. Human rights defender Eden Marcellena and peasants organizer Eddie Gumanoy were also abducted in Mindoro by unidentified armed men in April 2003. They had been investigating a pattern of human rights abuses, often involving *Bayan Muna* supporters, when they were seized. Their bodies were later found with gunshot wounds to the head and signs of torture.

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

- expressing grave concern for the safety of Mario Detroz, Joseph Gonzales and Ronaldo Comiso who were abducted in Sampaloc, Manila, on 18 August 2004;
- urging the authorities to immediately establish their whereabouts and guarantee their safety;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that, if they are in detention, they are not tortured or ill-treated and are allowed access to lawyers, relatives and any medical care they may need;
- urging that, if they are in detention, they be released immediately, unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence;
- urging the authorities to send a clear message to all armed forces personnel that human rights violations, including forced 'disappearances', will not be tolerated under any circumstances and that those found responsible will be brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo
Malacañang Palace
J.P. Laurel St
San Miguel 1005
Manila, Philippines

Fax: +63 2 736 1010

Salutation: Dear President Macapagal-Arroyo

Secretary Avelino Cruz Jr.
Secretary of National Defence
Department of National Defense
3rd Floor, DND Building
Camp Aguinaldo
EDSA, Quezon City
Metro Manila
Philippines

Fax: +63 2 911 6213

Salutation: Dear Secretary Cruz

COPIES TO:

Hon. Raul Gonzalez
Secretary of Justice
DOJ Main Building
Padre Faura Street
Manila 1004, Philippines

Fax: +63 2 521 1614

Salutation: Dear Secretary Gonzalez

and to diplomatic representatives of Philippines accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 8 October.