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PHILIPPINES: INVESTIGATE KILLING OF ACTIVISTS AND ADDRESS VIOLENCE IN NEGROS PROVINCE

The Marcos administration should order an effective and independent investigation into the killing of activists Ericson Acosta and Joseph Jimenez, in light of allegations that they are cases of summary execution, Amnesty International said today. The authorities must commit to upholding and respecting international human rights law and standards in the violence between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the New People's Army (NPA) in Negros Occidental province, Visayas region, including by respecting the right to life and allowing unimpeded humanitarian access to affected communities. The NPA must likewise renounce human rights abuses, including summary killings.

On 30 November, the 94th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army said in a statement that two NPA rebels were killed that day in an armed encounter in Kabankalan City, Negros Occidental. One of the casualties was later identified to be activist and peace consultant Ericson Acosta. According to the Philippine Army, the bodies of Acosta and Joseph Jimenez were recovered following a clash with 10 communist rebels, after they received information from residents of the rebels' presence in the area.

In a separate statement, however, the National Democratic Front (NDF) – the political wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) whose armed group is the NPA – said Acosta and Jimenez were initially captured alive. The group added the two men were in the area “to consult on the situation of farm workers in southern Negros and share developments regarding the Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reform (CASER)”. CASER was an agreement between the government of the Philippines and the NDF proposed during peace negotiations terminated by the government at the start of 2017.

Subsequent reports also claimed that contrary to the Philippine Army, Acosta and Jimenez were forcibly taken from the house they were staying and later declared killed. While the results of an autopsy have yet to be released, human rights group Karapatan said the bodies of Acosta and Jimenez bore “indications that they were stabbed and hacked”. The owner of the house and his family reportedly went missing after the killing.

The killing of Acosta and Jimenez happened in the context of increasing clashes in Negros Occidental province between the AFP and the NPA that started in early October. Groups and the media have reported violations including summary killings in the context of the clashes, both by the AFP, who are accused of extrajudicial executions of activists, and by NPA rebels, who have summarily killed “counter-revolutionaries.” Himamaylan City, where thousands of residents had fled amidst escalating violence, had been placed under a “state of calamity” relief workers earlier reported having difficulty delivering aid to trapped residents, owing to restrictions placed by the AFP. Ericson Acosta had previously been targeted by the government for his activism. He was arrested and detained by the AFP in Samar province in 2011, during which interrogators threatened to kill him if he did not confess to being a member of the NPA. He was later charged with illegal possession of explosives. He was freed in 2013 after the charges against him were dropped by the Department of Justice because of “serious irregularities”. In 2021, Ericson Acosta's partner, Kerima Tariman, was killed in a clash between the AFP and NPA in Silay City, Negros Occidental.

Before the recent clashes, several activists and human rights defenders have been killed in Negros Occidental. In 2018, human rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos was shot dead by still unidentified assailants in Kabankalan City. Activist Zara Alvarez was killed in a similar manner in Bacolod City two years later. Observers point to the rise in these killings – in Negros Occidental and elsewhere in the country – as having begun alongside intensified red-tagging, or the linking of groups and individuals to the armed communist movement following the breakdown of the peace negotiations in 2017; and the creation of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) in 2018 that adopted the “whole of nation” approach to ending the insurgency but has also red-tagged groups and individuals.

Amnesty International calls on the Philippine government to ensure an effective, independent and impartial investigation is promptly conducted into the credible and concerning allegations that Ericson Acosta and Joseph Jimenez were captured alive and subsequently killed; if proven, this constitutes a grave violation and anyone against whom there is sufficient admissible evidence of responsibility must be prosecuted in fair trials. All parties to the ongoing clashes must commit to ending violations and abuses and respect international human rights law and standards.