

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Death Threats

6 February 2015

Philippines

Sister Aquila Sy

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Sister Aquila Sy and several other religious workers in Negros Occidental, who have been subjected in recent weeks to harassment and death threats believed to emanate from organizations backed by military and local government authorities. Church workers and others involved in community work and human rights advocacy in the Philippines have increasingly been the object of harassment and human rights abuse by military and paramilitary forces. Civilian authorities have seldom taken action to halt these practices or to have held those responsible accountable before the law.

During a rally of some 300 people on 15 August outside the municipal hall of Himamaylan -- said to have been organized by the Mayor, Prudencia Silverio -- participants reportedly burned effigies of Sister Aquila and parish priest Fr. Eamon Gil and held placards urging their death. Similar rallies were reportedly staged daily from 28 to 31 August. When an elderly Columban priest, Father Eddie Allen, aged 84, confronted a crowd which had been shouting abuse during a mass at the church in Himamaylan, one of the crowd reportedly shouted "Kill the old priest". According to Father Gil some of the participants were told by local paramilitary groups that if they did not join the rally they would themselves be assumed to be members of the New People's Army (NPA). Although the rallies have apparently now stopped, Sister Aquila reported that, as of 6 September, she was still being subjected to harassment and death threats.

Hundreds of leaflets were reportedly distributed to houses in the area of Payao, Negros Occidental on 8 August 1990, inciting acts of violence against Sr. Aquila and other religious workers, including Father Gerson Balitor. Similar leaflets were distributed in barangay Carabalan, Himamaylan on 12 August which reportedly accused Father Gil of protecting NPA "Sparrows" and Father Des Quinn of aiding wounded NPA members. The leaflets were signed in the name of the Alyansa Kontra sa Tagpahimulos sa Katawhan (AKTK, Alliance Against Exploiters of the People). The AKTK may not even exist as an organization independent of the local military command; some military commanders have issued identity cards for organizations with similar names to members of paramilitary units which they direct.

The recent harassment of Sister Aquila would appear to be connected with her efforts in July 1990 to locate three men -- Bonifacio Sabanal, 19, Rufino Sabanal, 40, and Mamerto Lupicio, 25 -- members of the Federation of Internal Refugees in Negros, who "disappeared" shortly after their arrest on 6 July by CAFGU members and military personnel from the 61st IB. Military authorities reportedly accused the men, two of whom were recent evacuees, of being couriers for the NPA -- an allegation denied by their relatives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sister Aquila Sy is a member of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (PBVM) congregation. She is also the current regional coordinator of the Rural Missionaries in the Philippines (RMP) and the Vice-Chairperson of the Promotion of Church People's Rights (PCPR) - District V Southern Negros Occidental. She is well known for her community and human rights work on behalf of the disadvantaged and in particular on behalf of "internal evacuees", people forced to leave their homes due to intensive military operations. Sister Aquila was

among 25 religious workers and members of lawful cause-oriented organizations who were named in two "hit lists" distributed in May and June 1989 in parts of Negros Occidental province, reportedly by CAFGU members and "vigilante" groups. (See ASA 35/21/89, 29 June 1989. UA 209/89)

Religious workers and members of lawful non-governmental organizations involved in community and human rights work have often been publicly accused of sympathizing with the outlawed Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing the (NPA). Many have subsequently become victims of serious human rights violations committed by members of the security forces and a variety of government-backed paramilitary groups.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters:

- expressing concern for the safety of Sister Aquila Sy and other religious workers subjected to death threats and harassment apparently because of their community and human rights work;
- urging that an immediate investigation be conducted into the threats against the lives of Sister Aquila and other religious workers in Negros, in order to identify those responsible so that they can be brought to justice;
- asking that the government immediately take appropriate measures to guarantee the physical safety of Sister Aquila and other religious workers threatened in pamphlets and public demonstrations.

APPEALS TO:

President Corazon Aquino
Office of the President
Malacanang
Manila, Philippines

General Fidel V Ramos
Secretary of National Defense
Camp General Emilio Aguinaldo
Quezon City, Philippines

Telex 40414 MALCOM PN; 45618 RMC PN;
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Brig. Gen. Pedro Sistoza
Commander Regional Military Command 6
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Telegrams: Regional Military
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COPIES TO:

Mary Concepcion Bautista
Philippines Commission on Human
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Dona Julia Vargas avenue
Pasig, Metro Manila,
Philippines

Cardinal Jaime Sin
121 Arzobispo Street
Intramuros
Manila, Philippines

and to diplomatic representatives of the Philippines (and diplomatic representatives of the Vatican if any) in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat or your section office if sending appeals after 16 October 1990.