

0200 hrs gmt Wednesday 26 February 1992

£PHILIPPINES:
@HUNDREDS BRUTALLY KILLED SINCE 1988;
MILITARY STILL MAJOR FORCE

Hundreds of unarmed people have been brutally killed by government and government-backed forces over the past three years in the Philippines, where the military still plays a major role in the country's political life, Amnesty International said today (Wednesday 26 February).

In its latest report, the human rights organization said the government has in effect given the military free rein to fight the armed opposition -- fuelling violations like extrajudicial executions and undermining any official measures to stop abuses.

The authorities often claim that such killings, known as "salvaging" in the Philippines, are isolated and the victims armed insurgents killed in combat. But Amnesty International said there is evidence of widespread extrajudicial executions, including of children and elderly people, who weren't connected to the opposition and were often simply working, eating or sleeping at the time they were killed.

In August 1990, 19 members of one family, including a pregnant woman and six children, were shot dead by soldiers who went to their house to arrest the father, a suspected Muslim rebel. The military claimed he killed two soldiers while resisting arrest; he was gunned down trying to escape and the others were lined up in front of their house and shot dead.

The organization said the pattern of extreme human rights violations took root during the previous Marcos government, when "protecting national security" and combatting the armed opposition were used to justify the brutal crushing of virtually all political dissent.

Defeating the armed opposition groups, including the New People's Army (NPA), still influences much of the government's policy and military strategy today, even though democratic institutions were put in place after Marcos was ousted in 1986, the organization said.

There had been hopes for an improvement in the human rights situation when the government initially released political prisoners, brought in a new constitution and signed international human rights agreements. But the government ultimately hasn't tackled the long-term problems of military control and strategy, and has in practice acquiesced in military violations of human rights.

"The deeply-rooted human rights problems won't be solved simply by blaming particular leaders or changing the political stripe of the government," Amnesty International said.

"This, or any other government in the Philippines, has to confront the difficult question of running the country and the military in a way that doesn't inevitably lead to human rights being violated."

One of the most serious threats to human rights is the government's "total approach" counter-insurgency strategy, which the Philippines senate has identified as a cause of human rights violations and even the government has admitted has led to gross abuses.

The strategy gives regional military commanders considerable autonomy in fighting the armed opposition and has spawned an uncontrollable array of unofficial militia and "vigilante" groups. It has also led to the deadly practice of publicly identifying suspected government opponents known as "red labelling".

While the government has said it doesn't condone "red-labelling" the reality is that hundreds of people have been extrajudicially executed because of this strategy. Those killed include members of tribal communities, peasant and urban poor activists, farmers' and other trade union members, church workers and human rights lawyers.

Amnesty International said the deliberate killings of unarmed civilians and captives by the NPA have contributed to the serious human rights situation in the Philippines. Among those killed - in clear breach of humanitarian standards - have been trade unionists, government officials and NPA members accused of spying for the military.

"The violence of opposition groups, however, can never be held up as an excuse for the government meting out its own brutality," the organization said.

The government has also said that it has investigated alleged human rights violations and brought those responsible to justice, yet virtually no one in the military has ever been punished for extrajudicial executions or other serious human rights violations. In fact, in only one of the 85 detailed cases in Amnesty International's report has anyone been brought to justice.

The entire process of investigating violations and bringing people to justice is, in fact, biased in favour of the military, the organization said. Investigations and prosecutions take place within the military system, and even the Philippines' human rights commission and civil courts tend to accept soldiers' testimony without question. Witnesses, lawyers and activists are often threatened and sometimes even killed if they take on

the military.

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