

The Philippines: As U.S. Gives the Military Money and Troops

by Gary King

August 2014 was no exception to the stream of extrajudicial murders under President Aquino: seven community leaders gunned down, usually by masked men on motorcycles, with final shots to the head, following military unit surveillance, harassments and threats. These include two typhoon relief workers and peasant leaders noted for criticizing poor government relief efforts, two leaders of protests against expansion of agribusiness palm oil plantations, a Datu (Lumad elder) who would not sign away permission for a mine, a person leading land disputes with a former congressman, and a leader of Bayan Muna which supports the peasant farmers. The understudies of General Palparan continue the terror, hopelessness and insecurity of civilians.

—“Ruthless legacy: seven activists killed in August,” September 3, 2014, Bulatlat.com: journalism for the people

Lawyer murdered by law officers

As I left the Philippines on February 19 of this year, I learned that a friend was murdered, my sixth acquaintance who was killed extra-judicially by security forces. Attorney Noel Archival, a Free Legal Assistance lawyer who had been a long-time advocate for activists and the poor was returning home from a court hearing in Dumaguete City, Negros. He perhaps did not know he was being stalked around town by men in four vehicles. Leaving town, his SUV was followed by these vehicles, chased and trapped, and then an M-16 ended his life and that of his two companions, and gravely wounded the driver.

Within two days, the vehicles' license plates were known due to Municipal Hall security cameras and others around town, and there were sketches of some of his assassins. The cars were traced to a police impound lot—the location where they had been borrowed. At least one was returned—with a document about the attorney's work in the glove box. Assassins in the Philippines are not paid enough to be clever.

A month later, the names of five officers of the Highway Patrol Group 7 were broadcast by national media to show that the case was virtually solved. However, a lawyer representing the suspected officers objected on the grounds that one of them might actually become a state witness, and also on the grounds that the locations of all of the suspects were unknown. The National Bureau of Investigation was publicly, perhaps languidly, wondering if they had left the country.

In December of 2013, Noel had filed administrative and criminal charges against two of the suspects, 11 other police officers and their superior for “... dishonesty, grave misconduct and falsification of a public document...” to allegedly mislead a court in Cebu City regarding the license plate of a client. He challenged them to

arrest him if he had done anything wrong. Well, they have other ways to make problems disappear. My other lawyer friends have discussed this case, and ask who gave the order for death, and note that many people think that the greatest amount of car-nappings might be done by the Highway Patrol Group itself.

So it continues—the likely impunity in the Philippines when government employees commit crimes.

Impunity for army, paramilitary and private armies

Impunity is still the rule also and especially for the sins of the Philippine army, its paramilitary groups, and private armies. Executive Order 546, started by prior President Arroyo to deputize militias to help the Philippine police fight insurgencies, continues, even though the current President Benigno S. Aquino promised to rescind it. Trials in the record-setting 2009 massacre of 33 journalists and family members of a political candidate in Maguindanao, Mindanao, continue to sputter. Amnesty International notes that four witnesses in the cases against over 190 suspects, were not only murdered after giving testimony, but also dismembered. (This while only half of the suspects are held in jail.) The killings were committed by a private army, after Philippine National Police set up a roadblock, and turned the victims over to the private army of the Ampatuan clan. That private army had very modern weapons, even mortars and grenades, supplied by the Philippine government.

Blessing the mines at the expense of people and mountains

In May of 2013, President Aquino gave a State of the Nation speech. He vowed to safeguard mining operations from attacks by insurgents sympathetic to the indigenous mountain people, collectively called Lumad, who generally opposed total (yes, total) removal of mountain tops to get at the minerals within. Aquino believes there are almost \$1 trillion worth of minerals to be extracted. The companies that do this are 49% foreign owned, with the rest owned by wealthy Filipino families. The government is only entitled to 2% of the proceeds. It actually collects only 0.7%, due to inefficiencies and corruption. (Information shared by attorney Cheryl Daytec, who worked with Women Against Military Madness in Minneapolis in 2012-13 when she was studying human rights law of the University of Minnesota.)

Why should the government bend laws and allow very great environmental destruction when its take is so small? The average annual return on mining investments is 39%. Of course, the Lumad get nothing and have their villages and lands devastated.



Gary King and Cheryl Daytec spoke about the need to resist U.S. militarization and drones at the University of the Philippines Law School. Drone warfare violates international law and their use may constitute war crimes.

In June, Bishop Modesto Villasanta of the United Church of Christ of the Philippines, from Mindanao visited Minnesota, and he accompanied people from Amnesty International, the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota and the Ecumenical Advocacy Network on the Philippines to meet with staff at the offices of U.S. congressional representatives Betty McCollum and Keith Ellison. The bishop noted, with great irony, that he had gone to Hibbing in northern Minnesota and freely visited mines, which are a great tourist attraction. He dare not do that in the Philippines. Mines there have layers of armed security, privately employed, who do not allow pictures or visitors. (The Philippines has one of the highest rates of killing of investigative journalists in the world.)

He told about a minority religious leader, who was approached by local paramilitary men and asked to sign a document about mining. The religious leader said he could not, because he had just come from a church meeting that cautioned against private deals that promote mining. He would need to get approvals. He was never able to ask for the approvals because he was shot to death at his home in front of his children. Nothing has been done to arrest his murderer, who still is free. (From a talk by Bishop Modesto Villasanta, to the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota and United Church of Christ Minnesota Conference, Maplewood, MN, June 20, 2014)

Many Lumad leaders have been murdered, increasingly under President Aquino. Tribal leaders are aware of the displacement of communities and severe environmental damages that are typical of large-scale mining in the Philippines. When communities seek redress, leaders are vilified, called “communists”, and too often murdered. The Philippine government offers no protection. There is impunity

for the Philippine army, paramilitaries and private armies when they commit such human rights crimes.

Many reports are available, even the yearly U.S. State Department Report on the Philippines. Yet since 2013, the incidences of extrajudicial killings attributed to the Philippine army, paramilitaries, and national police have increased: So far in 2014, the rate is about seven extrajudicial killings per month, and another seven attempted killings.

The U.S. pivot to Asia

Ten percent of Foreign Military Assistance has been withheld from the Philippines by the U.S. for five years, due to lack of progress in investigations and prosecutions of killings, no meaningful training about human rights, and actual promotions of officers alleged to be human rights violators. In addition, this year, assistance is slated to rise 60% as the U.S. makes a "pivot to Asia". Secretary of State John Kerry and President Obama have been pushing to park extra (beyond the 600 U.S. Army in Mindanao since 9/11) U.S. troops and special forces, as well as drones, ships, and airplanes in the Philippines, as the U.S. wants to move 10% of its naval fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, to confront China and its recent island claims. Our military must do something to earn its pay if Middle East wars de-escalate.



Map: Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN. Circled areas are mentioned in this article.

When Obama visited the Philippines at the end of April, a ten-page Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the U.S. and the Philippines was signed with President Aquino. All items were about what the U.S. wanted; none promised benefit to the Philippines. Legality is questionable, since it was not approved by either nation's Senate. As part of this agreement, U.S. military personnel will be "embedded" in Philippine military bases—so they don't have to handle messy base security. Recently, Philippine Army Chief General Emmanuel Bautista announced the list of locations of the first three bases the Philippines will offer to the U.S. It includes Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija, north of Manila. This is an army base implicated in disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings, including the kidnapping, prolonged sexual slavery and murder of two University of Philippines female graduate students. (One retired general, Jovito Palparan, has been finally charged with kidnapping, along with two officers, but he eluded capture for more

than two years, until a month ago). Other generals in Mindanao now have imitated his crimes against Lumad leaders in mining areas, as they, too, want promotions.

Nominally much of U.S. aid, including obsolete ships and planes, will go to the almost non-existent Philippine Navy and Air Force so that they can bravely intimidate China. Other military hardware that may go to the Philippine Army includes guns, mortars, etc., and this will allow them to continue selling or giving old weapons to private armies.

Once again, the U.S. supports and grooms another Third World country for its geopolitical objectives.

Gary King, Ph.D., is a retired neuroscientist and the leader of Amnesty International Chapter 37, Minneapolis, and a member of the WAMM committee, Tackling Torture at the Top (T3.) He and his wife Glen King, a retired public-school math teacher, who was born in Cebu, Philippines, are active in numerous Filipino groups in Minnesota, including the Philippine Study Group of Minnesota (763-571-7696).