

Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines

Report of the Special UN Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

By [Philip Alston](#)

Global Research, November 27, 2007

United Nations 27 November 2007

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

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MISSION TO PHILIPPINES

Summary

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Over the past six years, there have been many extrajudicial executions of leftist activists in the Philippines. These killings have eliminated civil society leaders, including human rights defenders, trade unionists and land reform advocates, intimidated a vast number of civil society actors, and narrowed the country's political discourse. Depending on who is counting and how, the total number of such executions ranges from 100 to over 800. Counter-insurgency strategy and recent changes in the priorities of the criminal justice system are of special importance to understanding why the killings continue.

Many in the Government have concluded that numerous civil society organizations are "fronts" for the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed group, the New People's Army (NPA). One response has been counter-insurgency operations that result in the extrajudicial execution of leftist activists. In some areas, the leaders of leftist organizations are systematically hunted down by interrogating and torturing those who may know their whereabouts, and they are often killed following a campaign of individual vilification designed to instil fear into the community. The priorities of the criminal justice system have also been distorted, and it has increasingly focused on prosecuting civil society leaders rather than their killers.

The military is in a state of denial concerning the numerous extrajudicial executions in which its soldiers are implicated. Military officers argue that many or all of the extrajudicial executions have actually been committed by the communist insurgents as part of an internal purge. The NPA does commit extrajudicial executions, sometimes dressing them up as "revolutionary justice", but the evidence that it is currently engaged in a large-scale purge is strikingly unconvincing. The military's insistence that the "purge theory" is correct can only be viewed as a cynical attempt to displace responsibility.

Some of the other situations in which extrajudicial executions occur in the Philippines were also studied during the visit. Journalists are killed with increasing frequency as a result of the prevailing impunity as well as the structure of the media industry. Disputes between peasants and landowners, as well as armed groups, lead to killings in the context of agrarian reform efforts, and the police often provide inadequate protection to the peasants involved. A death squad operates in Davao City, with men routinely killing street children and others in broad daylight. While human rights abuses related to conflicts in western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago have received less attention than those related to the conflict with the communist insurgency, serious abuses clearly do occur, and improved monitoring mechanisms are necessary.

This report studies all of these problems and the institutional arrangements that have permitted them to continue. It concludes with a series of recommendations for reform. The Government has shown that it is capable of responding to human rights problems with clarity and decisiveness. This was on display when, in 2006, the Government abolished the death penalty, sparing the more than 1,000 convicts on death row. Any possibility of the death penalty being imposed without conformity to international human rights law was ended with the stroke of a pen.

The many measures that have been promulgated by the Government to respond to the problem of extrajudicial executions are encouraging. However, they have yet to succeed, and the extrajudicial executions continue.

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