

Philippine city officials ordered multiple death squad killings

Philippine city officials ordered multiple death squad killings. Damning report lists as many as 298 victims including children. Police officers at the crime scene of the murder of Rogelio Butalid, a broadcast commentator, outside his radio station in Tagum City, in the southern Philippines on December 11, 2013.



What should be a matter of outrage and great moral concern for every Filipino, and for every decent human being, is the revelation made by Human Rights Watch that a death squad in Mindanao has been on a killing rampage, targeting even street children as young as nine years old. The killings were allegedly carried out on the orders of the former mayor of the city of Tagum in Mindanao.

The 71-page report by Human Rights Watch released last May showed damning evidence and provided interviews with former hit men who were allegedly paid by former Tagum Mayor Rey "Chiong" Uy to kill anyone on orders. A text message set the killers in motion. The hit men were paid US\$110 for every killing. The killers divided the money among themselves, a former hit man said in a taped interview.

The former mayor has denied the allegations. "Tagum City's former mayor helped organize and finance a death squad linked to the murder of hundreds of residents," said Phelim Kine, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "[The mayor] called these citizens 'weeds'. He and other city officials and police officers underwrote targeted killings as a perverse form of crime control," Kine added.

Such revelations are not new in the Philippines. Other city officials throughout the country have been accused of using death squads to kill street children and anyone considered a threat or critic of local government. As many as 298 victims have been documented in the Human Rights Watch report.

This is not the first damning report that documented the dark side of Philippine government officials, politicians, police, military, and private corporations that are accused of using private assassination squads that go around on motor bikes killing children, priests, missionaries, pastors, Church and

human rights workers. We have documented many of these murders. Very few have been held accountable and no mastermind has been charged, let alone convicted of a single crime.

The killings are done to drive away begging street kids, create fear, and silence critics and defenders of human rights. This is how the tiny minority of wealthy Filipino elites use fear, force and murder to intimidate the people, cheat at elections and stay in power through family dynasties. The hitmen do it for money and the elites do it for political and economic advantage.

The report gives credence to the many allegations made by Filipino human rights workers for many years including this writer, who exposed a Davao death squad and was sued by former Davao City mayor Benjamin De Guzman in 1999. After a harrowing, dangerous year of legal defense, and a scary visit to Davao where street children formed a protective cordon around me to escort me safely from the airport, Mayor De Guzman withdrew the allegation on the day when I was to be arraigned in a Davao City court.

The intervention of Archbishop Fernando Capalla of Davao persuaded the mayor to withdraw the charge. The archbishop's brother, Romy Capalla, a human rights defender, was assassinated with a bullet to the head in March 2014 for his work defending the rights of small farmers who organized and assert themselves economically. The sugar mill operated by the farmers was burned down.

In Davao City, killings continue up to this day and are even lauded and considered necessary by some government officials. Church leaders rarely speak out or campaign against death squads and assassinations and social injustice, even when Church workers, journalists, and missionary priests are murdered for taking a stand with the poor and oppressed.

A survey by the Jesuit-run by Ateneo de Davao University in May 2014 shows that 98 percent of the people of the city, good Catholics all no doubt, are satisfied with the general performance of Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, who has been allegedly linked to the Davao death squad. Duterte denied the rumors and allegations.

Similar approval ratings were given to the Davao City government, the vice mayor, Task Force Davao, while the city police force got a 77 percent approval rating. It adds up to a sterling approval rating. They had better approve, or else. Irish Columban Fr Shay Cullen established the Preda Foundation in Olongapo City in 1974 to promote human rights and the rights of children, especially victims of sex abuse.

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