

POLITICAL KILLINGS IN SAN NARCISO

Human rights defenders (HRD) have long been targets of the violence that engulfed the Philippine agrarian reform program. On the Bondoc peninsula in southern Quezon, several people including five HRD from the municipality of San Narciso were killed between 1998 and 2008, with adverse effects for their relatives and entire communities. Hitherto no justice has been brought to those who perpetrated the crimes, which partly explains the continuing violence and a growing culture of impunity in the region.



© IPON archive | Exhuming the decomposing body of human rights defender Deolito Empas from a shallow grave; he was discovered three weeks after his death. His abduction was only reported to the police after four days because of the low trust in the police by the people.

In a bid to curb the widespread rural poverty and social injustice, the Philippine government enacted the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL or RA 6657) in 1988. The purpose of this law was to enable the distribution of agrarian land to landless citizens in order to stimulate production and development. However, the implementation of this law, also known as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), became a matter of controversy and violence, since it directly affected a crucial power-base in the Philippines; land ownership is an essential factor for exercising social, economic and political power and influence in the Philippines. Therefore, in order to preserve their

privileged status-quo, the landowners, who originally inherited the extensive chunks of land from former Spanish and American colonial masters, passionately oppose the program and are ready to apply any method within their means to cling on to the land. Their behaviour and actions have in effect led to delays in the implementation of the program while at the same time evoking violence and insecurity in various parts of the country.

The Bondoc Peninsula on the south-western tip of the province of Quezon has for a long time been one of the hotspots of agrarian reform-related disputes and the associated violence. Particularly in the municipality of San Narciso on the eastern side of the

peninsula, violence is explicitly used against any person who intends to apply to acquire land. Most of the land in the municipality belongs to the Uy, a locally influential but also unpopular landowning family. Since 2006 IPON observers have been closely following developments and human rights violations related to agrarian disputes committed in this municipality. Members of the Uy family do not only command significant economic means in San Narciso but also occupy most public offices and hold influential political positions. The area is also known to be a stronghold of the renegade New People's Army (NPA).

Between 1998 and 2008 several people, including five peasant leaders of the



Martin Nambula

29 years, Bachelor of Political Science and Philosophy, Makerere University, Uganda and Master of Art of Peace Research and International Politics from the University of Tuebingen, Germany. He is currently working with IPON as a human rights observer.

HRD group KMBP (Kilusang Magbubukid Bondoc Peninsula), were killed as a result of the agrarian disputes in the municipality of San Narciso. The KMBP is a local peasant organisation which not only encourages landless farmers to petition for land through the government's program but also advocates their human rights. The Uy family is indisputably keen to hold on to its land and subsequently its members apply numerous methods to avoid distributing the land. They applied for several exemptions on their landholding, besides threatening and harassing all tenants and workers who intend to apply for land distribution. Five KMBP leaders have been murdered, apparently to threaten and punish the HRD who encourage and promote the struggle for land rights.

In June 1998, a KMBP leader and active HRD called Mr. Vender became the first victim of the series of killings related to agrarian violence in San Narciso. According to official records, his murderers hacked and stabbed him to death. He was succeeded by Mr. Romero as leader of the organisation, but Romero was shot and killed in October 2003 by armed assailants reportedly hired by some members of the Uy family. His successor in the leadership position, Mr. Benitez, was also killed in March 2004 under similar circumstances. The year before, in February 2003, Mr. Tejino, a local leader from the neighbouring village, had been attacked and killed by the NPA. In November 2008, Mr. Empas, also a leading HRD in the KMBP, was abducted by unknown assailants from a bar and his body was only discovered three weeks after his disappearance with gunshot wounds. The victims were either accused of advocating for their land rights or branded informers of the national Philippine security agencies before being killed. The NPA claimed responsibility for the murder of Tejino in the public, accusing the HRD of having spied for the military.

Although there may be several indicators that

some members of the Uy family masterminded these killings, such evidence is insufficient to secure legal prosecution against them. This is mainly because it is based on assumptions and rumours centred on the possible motive: avoiding distribution of land in the municipality. It is, nevertheless, remarkable that all victims had disagreements with the Uys over land distribution. Their trouble only started after they petitioned the authorities on grounds that their applications for land had been unfairly dishonoured. Members of the KMBP believe that since the Uys are dedicated to maintain their landholding, they are ready to use all economic and political positions to harass those who wish to acquire land from their landholding on the one hand, as well as to influence the direction and result of investigations into the violence on the other hand. In the case of Benitez's murder, a prominent Uy family member, who also serves as mayor of San Narciso, decided to stand surety for the release of one of the prime suspects from prison. In another dramatic incidence, armed NPA members attacked a provincial jail where they dramatically freed all inmates including the prime murder suspect of Empas. Such an action could only happen with internal and high profile help. However, the Uy family denies any allegations of involvement and instead blames the problems on personal grudges between KMBP members. The executions were carried out brutally and with little secrecy. The victims initially received death threats over a considerable period of time, their families and friends were also warned of the upcoming killing and finally the victims disappeared only to be discovered dead later. Their corpses were disposed off in a manner which suggested a public show of ruthlessness and impunity. Such actions were indeed meant to openly create fear in the public and deter other HRD from continuing with their mission.

It is no coincidence that these killings happened

© IPON archive | In fear: Deolito Empas' family. Members were forced to flee their village and seek safety in the cities. Some sought state protection through the witness protection program. Their movement was therefore confined to restricted areas.



to leaders of the HRD group of the Uy landholding who earlier applied or petitioned authorities against irregularities in land distribution processes. They did not occur by accident to those who actively participated in local politics. KMBP leaders who chose to spearhead the struggle for human rights became main targets. They were killed because they were able to mobilise other farmers to demand for their rights. The killings effectively instilled fear among other KMBP members, as they became hesitant to take up leadership positions in their organisation. Besides harassing HRD, the violence also caused unimaginable suffering for the victims' families, relatives and friends. Because of the fear and uncertainty about their own personal security, the families of the murdered leaders were forced to flee into hiding, to avoid reprisal from the landowner and his agents also known as goons locally. Those who decided to seek legal justice, as in the case of the widows of Benitez and Empas, had to apply for state witness protection because their lives were threatened by the relatives and accomplices of the murderers. Applying for state witness protection is a bureaucratically long and humiliating process which implies relocation and perhaps isolation from your community. Several members of the families of murdered victims were forced to flee into hiding in the cities of Manila, Lucena and other unknown remote locations.

It may be assumed that it is due to lack of political will, coupled with the laxity of the public servants, that all murders remain hitherto unresolved. A couple of the cases are pending in the law courts, awaiting further investigations or rather voluntary witnesses to testify. In all cases, apprehended suspects were released on bail and some have since fled into hiding as fugitives. The major players who include the local politicians, security agencies and the judiciary have all failed in their roles



© IPON | On the grave: Cigarettes, candles and flowers for Deolito Empas, local president of KMBP, killed February 19, 2008.

to serve the citizens, protect them and protect the law. The local authorities are constantly influenced by members of the influential family through threats, intimidation and bribery. The local police and military authorities blame their inability to act and protect citizen on lack of equipment and logistics. They claim that they are poorly equipped and lack transport means to access scenes of crime and violence. The courts and prosecutors have equally failed as none of the cases ever received a final verdict. They claim that the police ought to do more in matters such as securing witnesses and the necessary evidence. The government's failure to solve such cases encourages impunity among the rich and politically influential families, thereby encouraging repeated violence and insecurity in the area. Calls by the local organisations and other international organisations like IPON to have these matters reviewed have often fallen on the government's deaf ear.

San Narciso is one of the five municipalities of the Bondoc peninsula where international human rights

observers concentrated on collecting information and recording facts about human rights violations since 2006. Members of IPON observed that although the government enacted a law to change the existing system which promotes exploitation and oppression of the poor, it has done little to enforce this law. IPON's observers have since appealed to and approached state actors from the region on several occasions through various means to fulfil their responsibility to protect and help the citizens realise their rights. Enforcing the law by the state and its agents is the primary function of the government of the Philippines; therefore the prosecution of those who mastermind the murder of HRD should take place. This would certainly put a stop to the culture of impunity and promote the rule of law, peace and prosperity in the country.

This article was written based on information, records and data compiled by IPON human rights observers from the municipality of San Narciso, Quezon Province, Philippines. ■