

OPLAN BAYANIHAN – FROM GOOD INTENTIONS TO IMPUNITY

Over the last few decades, the counterinsurgency programmes in the Republic of Philippines have proved to be brutal and relentless especially on the Indigenous peoples of Mindanao. This article examines the consequences of PNoy administration's supposedly citizen-focused 'multi-stakeholder' approach to peace and security in the Philippines under Oplan Bayanihan.

On July 10, 2012, thirty-four displaced indigenous families staged a weeklong hunger strike in Malaybalay City, Northern Mindanao. (SunStar 11.07.2012) The protesters demanded the immediate arrest of Aldy Salusad, the leader of a paramilitary group, New Indigenous People's Army for Reforms (NIPAR).

In early March 2012, Salusad allegedly killed Jimmy Liguyon, an anti mining activist, Lumad 'Barangay Captain and Vice Chairman of KALISO, an organisation of Matigsalug and Manobo indigenous groups from southern Bukidnon. It was Liguyon's staunch opposition to the entry of large scale mining ventures on their ancestral land that brought him to his violent end.' (Gold Star Daily 31.03.2012)

Following this event and receiving death threats from Aldy Salusad (Hu-

man Rights Watch 2012), his family and other members of his clan fled to Malaybalay city. Since then, the Liguyon family has gone to extraordinary lengths, running from pillar to post, to lobby with the government and international agencies to seek justice.

With their efforts yielding only in the issuance of an arrest warrant, there have been no arrests so far, and the perpetrator along with his paramilitary group continue to openly terrorize the communities in question and others opposing large scale mining activities in this area.

The paramilitary group NIPAR is said to be directly under the control and protection of the 8th Infantry Battalion (IB) of the Armed forces of the Philippines (AFP). (Bulatlat 2012)

This extraordinary account is not an isolated incident but a salient feature in the mineral rich and bio diverse landscapes of the country. Over the last few decades, the Philippines have been plagued with multiple unresolved conflicts in the southern island of Mindanao. The western part of Mindanao is riddled with the Muslim secessionist movement, with the rest of the island, in pockets, by the communist rebels called the 'New Peoples Army' (NPA).

In the last two decades, successive Philippine administrations have intensified their crackdown on the communist insurgency through various counter insurgency programmes that have contributed to a steady decline in the insurgent population, from an estimated strength of 25,000 fighters during the late 1980s. According to the current 'Internal Peace

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and Security Plan: Oplan Bayanihan', in 2010 the NPA strength comprised of only 5,000 fighters influencing about 2.4 percent of the total barangay (village) nationwide.

Under the National Security Policy (2011-2016), the current administration of President Benigno Aquino III launched its very own counterinsurgency plan, the 'Internal Peace and Security: Oplan Bayanihan' ('Operation of Collective Effort'). This plan proposed to involve the AFP, the Philippine National Police, government agencies, NGOs and local communities, often referred to as 'Stakeholders in peace and security' (Bayanihan 2010: 14-16), in effectively combating and eliminating the communist insurgency in the country.

This open, transparent and people-centered approach aimed at ending impunity in the Philippines by addressing and minimising human rights violations in the affected communities. However, the Oplan Bayanihan has proved to be no different from the earlier counter insurgency programmes. Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, harassment and militarization in Indigenous communities continue to reign. Since 2011, there have been at least 15 corroborated accounts of extrajudicial killings in the southern island of Mindanao, carried out by state-backed militias or private armies, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and their paramilitary groups, under Oplan Bayanihan. Under this campaign, the AFP's strategic approach is not just limited to combat operation but also includes non-combat operations such as development oriented activities and civil-military operations (CMO) initiatives with partners such as the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). (Bayanihan 2010: 24)

The administration thus continues to organize AFP's Investment Defense Force (IDF), introduced by the previous Macapagal Arroyo government (Zambotimes 2008), that has become a de facto means to protect power assets, infrastructures and mineral development projects, which have been so far successful in attracting foreign investment in this conflict riddled island.

Mindanao illustrates a classical scenario that exists in many developing countries where the national economic interests are in conflict with

the peaceful existence of its minority groups. This region is roughly one third of the size of Germany, is home to 18 Lumad groups or indigenous groups with an estimated population of 13 million, who are primarily farmers and traditional miners residing in the mineral rich parts of the island for centuries.

With the presence of both the Maoist NPA and the military in this hinterland, the Indigenous communities often find themselves caught up in the middle of various land acquisition propositions for mining, plantations and other economic ventures. Refusal to accede such proposals cascades into a series of human rights violations often leading to summary executions by paramilitary outfits. The human rights advocates often find themselves victims of Red-Baiting and easily come under fire from the Philippines National Police, AFP and its paramilitary groups stationed in the respective region.

On May 9, 2012, Margarito J. Cabal, 47, was gunned down by unknown assailants outside his residence in the southern parts of Bukidnon, Northern Mindanao. At the time of his death he was the leader of the Task Force Save Pulungi (TFSP), a coalition of indigenous communities and farmers from Bukidnon and Cotabato provinces. The TFSP campaigns against the proposed First Bukidnon Electric Cooperative (FIBECO) hydroelectric mega dam, called 'Pulangi V'. This project threatens to submerge 22 villages in Bukidnon and Cotabato provinces. Cabal was also a government official working at the local Mayor's office in Kibawe, Bukidnon. His work involved travelling to the remote villages in this region that are also marked as the NPA stronghold which has facilitated the deployment of the 8th Infantry Battalion under the Oplan Bayanihan.

According to a recent report published by Human Rights Watch, Cabal's family confirmed that he was under surveillance by the 8th Infantry Battalion as Cabal was suspected of having links with the NPA. In the past months since the murder, the police and the local authorities have completely failed to investigate the case.

Yet again in early September 2012, a 23 year old Lumad human rights defender, Genesis Ambason was killed in the province of Agusan Del Sur

by the paramilitary group Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU), which is under the 26th Infantry Battalion of the AFP. (Bulatlat 2012) The accused members of CAFGU claim that this incident was an armed encounter

with the Philippine judicial system and the Aquino government, to address the promised issue of impunity that continues to dominate the country. The indigenous human rights defenders and environmental activist who dare to stand up for

proportions are relying on the army to help them acquire land where the army units are deployed. Moreover, Datu Goaynon emphasised that all the indigenous people's organisations have to be recognised by the military, police and other agencies, which make it difficult for the Lumads to assert their basic human rights.

Datu Goaynon reiterated that Lumad leaders and human rights advocates who are persistent in educating the oppressed and abused indigenous peoples of their rights and struggles against destructive mining, plantations and dams, face death threats. One of the Lumad leaders that Datu Goaynon had named during our interview in August 2012 as having received death threats was Gilbert Paborada. On October 3, 2012, Paborada was gunned by two unidentified gunmen in the province of Misamis Oriental.

Many domestic and international NGOs and human rights organisations have repeatedly called on the Government of the Philippines to repeal Oplan Bayanihan.

In the first week of August, the Liguyon family and 34 other families returned to their village after five months of displacement. Despite security issues, they simply had to return. As Liguyon family's hope to seek justice gradually diminishes, the Lumads of Mindanao continue their dauntless struggle to retain their ancestral land, culture and traditions, under the murky shadow of Oplan Bayanihan's promise of peace, development and prosperity. ■



© Shirali | The strike, including a hunger strike, has been going on for months, Bukidnon, July 2012.

with NPA rebels. Ambason was the Secretary-General of an indigenous organisation, Tagdumahan, which has been actively campaigning against the entry of large-scale mining ventures into their ancestral domain since the 1980s. He had also campaigned for the release of community members who had reportedly been illegally detained by the military.

These incidences of extrajudicial killing may be just the tip of the ice berg but it they exemplify the failure of the Phi-

lippine judicial system and the Aquino government, to address the promised issue of impunity that continues to dominate the country. The indigenous human rights defenders and environmental activist who dare to stand up for their rights meet with death threats and intimidation, often finding no support from the respective authorities. In an interview with Society for Threatened Peoples in early August 2012, the Chairperson of KALUMBAY Regional Lumad Organisation Datu (title for community chief) Jomorito Goaynon said that the government is using Oplan Bayanihan as an apparatus to target indigenous peoples opposing domestic or foreign investments on their ancestral land. Under the auspices of Oplan Bayanihan, many mining and agribusiness cor-

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