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Philippines: Growing number of political killings risks retaliatory spiral

Numbers of political killings in the Philippines are increasing for a second year, with at least 51 killings in the first six months of 2006 compared to 66 collated by Amnesty International in the whole of 2005. The leadership of the armed insurgency has threatened to form retaliatory assassination squads.

The killings follow a pattern of unidentified men shooting leftist party members before escaping on motorcycle and have taken place in the context of an intensified counter-insurgency operation. The Philippine government has failed to protect individuals, according to an Amnesty International report released today.

"Stemming this tide of killings requires genuine political will to ensure prosecutions in all cases -- not only the ten cases in ten weeks recently called for by President Arroyo," said Tim Parritt, South East Asia researcher at Amnesty International.

Attacks rarely lead to the charge, arrest, or prosecution of the murderers. Amnesty International is concerned that a long-existing failure to prosecute and convict those suspected of human rights violations is having a corrosive impact on public confidence in the rule of law.

Of 114 killings recorded since 2001 by Task Force *Usig* -- the unit that coordinates investigations into political killings -- the police have arrested suspects in just three cases and no convictions have been reported.

"Solving these crimes does not mean simply the police filing a report with the prosecutor. It means an independent and effective investigation followed by a fair trial and punishment of those found responsible. Only then can justice be said to be done."

Reverend Edison Lapuz, a member of his church's national council, worked for the rights of farmers and fisherfolk and served as a regional co-ordinator for the Bayan Muna political party. He was active in seeking justice for the killing of a local human rights lawyer, Felidito Dacut, who had been shot dead by two men riding a motorcycle.

On 12 May 2005 Reverend Lapuz was killed by two unidentified men in the house of his father-in-law, whose funeral he had been attending earlier that day. Local residents said they had seen four men on motorcycles parked at a nearby store before the shooting, wearing their helmets.

Before his death, Reverend Lapuz had complained to fellow church workers in Manila that he was under surveillance by the military. His sister said that uniformed military personnel had come to their father's house and asked for detailed information about her brother the previous October.

There are serious concerns about police investigations into Reverend Lapuz's death, with witnesses not being offered adequate protection. The investigation remains stalled, and over a year since the attack no charges have been filed or arrests made.

"The failure to identify and investigate suspects is fuelling a lack of trust in the police and aggravating the lack of convictions. Witnesses are afraid to come forward. Victims' families are liable to refuse to involve themselves in police investigations or to withdraw from court proceedings," said Tim Parritt.

"Those responsible, including any from the security forces, must be prosecuted and punished. It must be established whether there was an official chain of command underlying both the crime and its cover-up."

The organisation is concerned that the government's declaration of "all-out war" on the Communists paves the way for further increases in killings. Most of those killed are members of legal leftist political parties which despite their legal status have been accused by senior government officials of being front organisations for illegal communist armed groups.

"No-one deserves to die for their political affiliation," said Tim Parritt. "It should be a deep embarrassment to the government that people in the Philippines cannot freely exercise their rights of political expression and association."

The increasing killings have contributed to the breakdown of the peace process with the Communists. Amnesty International believes that only when the government takes decisive steps to prevent and prosecute political killings can any hope for peace be realised.

To see the report, *Philippines: Political killings, human rights and the peace process*, please go to : <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa350062006>.