

Written by Arturo P. Garcia

Thursday, 20 November 2008 05:54 - Last Updated Thursday, 20 November 2008 05:55

Pesante-USA, a Filipino-American peasant, environmental and human-rights advocacy group confirmed that human-rights abuses are continuing in the Philippines with 21 extrajudicial killings taking place in the third quarter of the year.

Pesante-USA confirmed that more-than 221 people have killed by security forces under the Arroyo regime since she assumed power in 2001. It said also that there were fewer people killed during the 14-years of martial law under President Ferdinand Marcos (than during the 8-year reign of President Arroyo). Pesante-USA reported that of the killings, 19 took place on the restive southern island of Mindanao where the government is fighting Muslim and communist groups, substantiated and according to a report by Karapatan, an umbrella organization of human-rights groups in the Philippines.

Editor's Note: The Pesante-USA will join the anti-Arroyo rally in front of the Sheraton Gateway Hotel-LAX tomorrow afternoon, Nov. 21, 2008. The anti-Arroyo rally is expected to be the biggest demonstration against a visiting Filipino President in the Filipino-American history. Karapatan said 43 people had been victims of "summary executions or arbitrary killings" in the first nine months of the year. It said among the most recent killings was a labor activist, Maximo Aranda, who was gunned down in July by three unidentified armed men in Compostela Valley on Mindanao while in August another activist, Roel Doratot, was also shot dead in the same area. Both men belonged to groups that have been highly critical of the military and the administration of President Gloria Arroyo, Karapatan said.

The rest of the deaths were civilians caught in the crossfire between the Philippine Army and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) -- including four children and a pregnant woman who were killed in a military aerial bombardment of a civilian community where retreating rebels were said to have fled.

"The Philippine military insisted that those killed in the air strikes were rebels but local government officials said the victims were civilians," Karapatan noted. It said the soldiers initially described the dead as MILF sympathizers but later retracted the statement and labeled them "collateral damage".

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The Philippine government has suspended talks with the MILF and launched a massive assault after the rebels carried out coordinated attacks across several Mindanao provinces last August.

Mindanao War Escalates, Human Rights Suffers

At the height of the fighting in late August, government sources said more-than 600,000 people were displaced from their homes. London-based rights group Amnesty International last month said that of that total, more-than half remained in evacuation camps, where water and food are dwindling and sanitation is a major problem.

In 2007, the UN's special rapporteur on extra-judicial killings Philip Alston, as well as a Philippine fact-finding mission, blamed the Philippine military for many of the killings, a claim that they hotly contested. More than 930 people, including rights workers and political activists critical of government, have been murdered or assassinated since President Arroyo assumed power in 2001, Karapatan said.

Pesante's tabulation is different from Karapatan's count and that is lower than the estimated 930 activist killed. Pesante confirmed that more-than 221 people have been killed extra-judicially in the Philippines since 2001. # # #

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