

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS UNFAIRLY TURN THEIR GUNS ON THE PHILIPPINES' AQUINO

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Past critics of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos's human rights record, including Amnesty International and the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, now have turned their guns on Philippine President Corazon Aquino for alleged human rights abuses under her administration.¹ These organizations, along with Philippine human rights groups like Task Force Detainees, are right to be concerned about political killings, the rise of anti-communist citizens' defense (or "vigilante") groups, and continued abuses by the Philippine military. The trouble is that these groups do not seek with equal vigor to expose the extensive abuses of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Its twenty-year war against Philippine democracy, after all, is the main cause for the renewed cycle of left-versus-right violence that again has made human rights an issue in the Philippines. Nor do the human rights groups expose how the CPP uses human rights issues to advance its political goal of delegitimizing the Aquino government.

100 Cases of Communist Abuses. Aquino has revived the Philippine democratic process, which had been put on hold by Marcos. From 1972 to 1981, he had ruled under martial law, which allowed him to deal swiftly with communists but also to suppress democratic opposition and the press. Aquino has tried to make peace with the CPP and has created institutions to defend human rights. One of her first official acts after taking power in February 1986 was to overrule her military advisors and free suspected communist prisoners, eventually numbering 563. By December that year, her government had negotiated a 60-day cease-fire with the rebels, which the CPP refused to extend in February 1987. In March 1986 she abolished the National Intelligence Security Agency, which, under Marcos, had been responsible for political killings. She also established the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, composed of military and human rights representatives, including the Task Force Detainees. This group was superseded in May 1987 by the constitutionally mandated Commission on Human Rights, which by the end of 1987 had received over 100 cases of communist abuses reported by the military.

¹ Amnesty International, *Philippines, Unlawful Killings By Military And Paramilitary Forces*, New York, March 1988; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, *Vigilantes in the Philippines: A Threat to Democratic Rule*, New York, 1988.

Under Aquino, the military's overall human rights record has improved significantly as a result of better leadership, discipline, and improved pay and material conditions. Philippine Defense Secretary Fidel Ramos claims that of 298 cases of alleged human rights abuses filed against the military in 1986 and 1987, only 39 had sufficient evidence to be passed to military courts.²

"People's Justice" and Public Executions. Today the Communist Party of the Philippines controls about 20 percent of the countryside; its 25,000 New People's Army (NPA) guerrillas and its urban "sparrow" assassination squads were responsible for about 3,000 deaths last year and 1,618 in the first half of this year.³ From its behavior in the areas that it controls, it seems likely that if the CPP takes power in the Philippines it could impose a totalitarian state as brutal as Cambodia's Khmer Rouge. The CPP is certain to establish "people's courts" to try and punish "enemies of the revolution."⁴ Today the Party already metes out "people's justice," or public executions, in areas it controls to criminals and to those who oppose their rule. From late 1985 to early 1986, the CPP on the Philippine island of Mindanao purged more than 800 communist activists suspected of disloyalty.⁵ Witnesses report victims being stabbed to death and of a "Kummander Miriam" who delighted in giving sadistic beatings.⁶ Former high ranking CPP officials on the island of Negros expect that 60 of their comrades still in the Party soon will be killed.⁷

To mask its brutality, and to foment political and economic unrest, the CPP controls legal front groups operating in almost every sector of Philippine society. The main fronts are the League of Filipino Students (LFS), the May First Movement (KMU) trade union federation, the People's Party (PNB), and the New Nationalist Alliance (BAYAN). They lead mass campaigns and strikes to weaken the government. Several leaders of these fronts have been assassinated by unknown right-wing groups. CPP "sparrow" assassins, meanwhile, have killed many police. The Aquino government has conducted detailed investigations of the front leaders' murders.

Refusing to Investigate Communist Atrocities. Apparently willing to help the CPP is the Philippines' most well known human rights monitor, the Task Force Detainees (TFD). Staffed largely by Roman Catholic clergy and lay workers, it has documented human rights abuses since 1974 and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. But TFD consistently refuses to investigate communist atrocities. A former New People's Army "sparrow" assassin acknowledges that when he was arrested for murder in February 1985, TFD worked for four months to gain his release. He insisted that TFD knew he was guilty before they came to his aid.⁸

2 Address by Secretary Fidel V. Ramos before the Asia Society, New York, May 19, 1988.

3 Statistics provided by the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

4 National Program of the National Democratic Front, January 1985.

5 Alden Alag, "885 CPP 'moles' purged, salvaged," *The Philippine Star*, July 18, 1988, p. 1.

6 Dr. John Whitehall, *Communism Tempted*, Pacific Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, 1988, p. 60; Anthony Speath, "'Killing Fields' Uncovered in Philippines," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 1987, p. 22.

7 Interview with the author, Bicolod, The Philippines, July 16, 1988.

8 Interview with the author, Davao, The Philippines, July 12, 1988.

During her November 1986 visit to Washington, TFD co-chairwoman Sister Mariani Dimaranan said that CPP founder Jose Maria Sison and other communists released by Aquino in February 1986 were "heros."⁹ When Dimaranan was asked to investigate the case of two communists suspected of having been killed in the Mindanao purge, however, she refused.¹⁰ Philippine Cardinal Jaimie Sin, meanwhile, has "disowned" the TFD.¹¹

Restoring Calm. CPP violence in Mindanao prompted the formation of a Davao-based community self defense group called the Alsa Masa, in mid-1986. Labeled "vigilantes," groups like Alsa Masa are composed of armed and unarmed civilians. The Alsa Masa has restored calm to Davao, which in 1985 was known as "Murder City" because the CPP was trying to take control. Today the Alsa Masa receives the "unqualified" support of the local Archbishop, Antonio Mabutas.¹²

In 1987 the Aquino government endorsed un-armed self defense groups and issued guidelines for their conduct. However, Aquino reversed herself this July, in her State of the Nation Address, ordering the groups to disband. It is expected that many will be integrated into new local defense units being formed by the military.

Realizing the danger posed by the self defense groups, in early 1987 the CPP launched a propaganda campaign against them and to discredit the Aquino government. In May 1987 former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark led a delegation to the Philippines to investigate the vigilantes. The delegation's final report acknowledges that the delegation was assisted by the Ecumenical Partnership for International Concerns, identified by the Armed Forces of the Philippines as "communist front."¹³ The Ramsey Clark report ignores CPP abuses, criticizes the vigilantes and the Aquino government's defense of human rights, and accuses the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Information Service of assisting the Philippine military's counterinsurgency campaign.¹⁴ The report presents no concrete evidence of the latter accusation. Even so, the CPP has already warned that it will attack U.S. personnel it judges to be helping the Philippine military. A U.S. official based in the Philippines told The Heritage Foundation: "The Ramsey Clark Report endangered the lives of U.S. personnel in the Philippines."

The State Department's Questionable Sources. Legitimate human rights groups run the risk of unwittingly helping the CPP when they fail to be as critical of the CPP as they are of the military. The Amnesty International report on the Philippines, for instance, devotes one and a half pages to CPP abuses and 17 pages to military and vigilante abuses. The Lawyer's Committee report is somewhat more expansive on CPP abuses. Both human rights groups, however, acknowledge that reports of military abuses began to increase only after the CPP resumed its

9 Address to the Church Coalition for Human Rights, Capital Hilton hotel, Washington, D.C., November 5, 1988.

10 Sylvia Mayuga, "Coming Full Circle with the Revolution," *Sunday Globe Magazine* (Manila), May 8, 1988, p. 8.

11 Hong Kong AFP, "Cardinal Disbands 'Infiltrated' Church Group," February 4, 1988.

12 "Bishop backs Davao Groups," *Manila Bulletin*, July 18, 1988, p.5; "How Davao Was Won," *Asiaweek*, December 4, 1987, p. 20.

13 "Military Discloses Shakeup in CPP Leadership," *Malaya*, November 1, 1987, p. 1; Mr. Ramsey Clark, Professor Gerald Horne, Mr. Ralph McGehee, Sr., Catherine Pinkerton, CSJ, Dr. Lester Ruiz, Mr. Leonard Weinglass, *Report Of A U.S. - Philippine Fact-Finding Mission To The Philippines, May 20-30, 1987*, p. iii of draft.

14 Clark, *et al.*, p. 46.

war in February 1987. The U.S. State Department's latest human rights report on the Philippines, meanwhile, gives the Task Force Detainees legitimacy by citing them as a source of information. The State Department should not cite TFD figures. Both State and Amnesty International should examine how the CPP uses the human rights issue in the Philippines.

The Reagan Administration and the U.S. Congress should be cautious about criticizing Aquino's human rights record; it is a vast improvement from the Marcos days. Some in Congress are beginning to speak out against Aquino's use of vigilante groups. Critics must realize, however, that some of these groups have turned the tide of battle against the CPP. During his June 1987 visit to Manila, Secretary of State George Shultz endorsed Aquino's policy.¹⁵

It is important to expose human rights abuses. Doing so, however, demands strict objectivity, especially in the Philippine situation where the government must fight a communist revolution.

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¹⁵ Neil A. Lewis, "Shultz Endorses Philippine Paramilitary Groups," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1987, p. A12.