

The Philippines

2006 was not a good year for human rights in the Philippines. Extrajudicial killings and “disappearances” appear to be on the rise. Armed insurgents and militant Islamist groups continue to kill civilians, politicians, and members of the security forces around the country.

Political tensions persist. On February 24, 2006, President Arroyo declared a week-long state of emergency after claiming to have uncovered a coup plot by members of the military, the political opposition, and communist rebels. Public assembly was temporarily banned, and scores of soldiers and leftists were detained or threatened with arrest, including five members of congress.

In June 2006 President Arroyo gave the army a two-year deadline to eradicate the New People’s Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which has been engaged in an armed rebellion against the government since the 1960s.

In August 2006, groups opposed to Arroyo brought impeachment charges against her for allegedly tampering with the results of the 2004 presidential elections. The impeachment effort failed in congress, where a majority of representatives continue to support the president.

In a positive development, President Arroyo and the Philippines congress approved legislation that abolished the death penalty in June 2006. A ceasefire with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) remained in force throughout 2006.

Extrajudicial Killings and “Disappearances”

Human rights defenders, community activists, politically active journalists, outspoken clergy, and members of left-wing political parties were killed or “disappeared” throughout 2006. Although different political parties and civil society

groups produce differing estimates of the number of victims, research conducted by Human Rights Watch confirms that scores of individuals were killed in 2006 and that military personnel played a role in many of the killings.

Suspected victims of politically motivated killings range from the young to the old. Two such examples are 20-year-old Cris Hugo, a student leader with the League of Filipino Students in the Bicol region of southern Luzon, who was gunned down on March 19, 2006; and Bishop Alberto Ramento of the Philippines Independent Church, who was stabbed to death on October 3, 2006, at age 69. Some attacks clearly target members of legal left-wing political parties, such as the grenade thrown at the office of the Anakpawis political party in Kidapawan City, Cotabato, on May 7, 2006, which severely injured Roderick Abalde, a coordinator for Anakpawis, and Jobanie Tacadao, a spokesperson for the left-wing Bayan Muna party. But many other victims appear to be low-level community activists—Pastor Isaias Sta. Rosa, shot behind his house on August 3, 2006, for instance—or to have left active political life many years ago—such as Danilo Escudero, who was gunned down in front of his six-year-old daughter on July 20, 2006. Escudero’s main political activities appear to have been during the 1970s.

To date no individual has been convicted of any of the hundreds of political killings which local human rights groups and journalists report have been committed since 2001. Leftist groups accuse the security forces of carrying out the executions as part of their counter-insurgency campaign. The military has not acknowledged any role in the killings, let alone taken steps to investigate or prosecute any perpetrators in the ranks.

In August 2006 President Arroyo created a special police taskforce, Task Force Usig, which she charged with solving 10 cases within 10 weeks. During its 10-week mandate the Task Force claims that 21 cases were solved by filing cases in court against identified suspects, all of them members of the CPP and NPA. Twelve suspects involved in these incidents are said by the Task Force to be under police custody. Arroyo also established a special commission, under former Supreme Court Justice José Melo, to examine the killings. Opposition and human rights groups criticized the Melo Commission for having little power to carry out investigations and for being made up purely of government-picked commissioners.

The ongoing killings and the government's failure to bring even a single perpetrator to justice has contributed to deep public distrust in government and widespread fear in areas where killings have occurred, particularly among witnesses and victims' families. The latter groups often are afraid to cooperate with police for fear of reprisals.

Vigilante killings of individuals suspected of involvement in criminal activities also appear to continue in some provincial cities, with little or no condemnation or prosecution by local officials.

Abuses by Armed Groups

Filipino civilians continue to be purposefully targeted by militant groups such as Abu Sayyaf that the government denounces as terrorist organizations. Various bomb blasts on the southern islands of Mindanao and Jolo killed at least 21 people and injured at least 80, and caused serious economic damage to local communities. The Philippines government has arrested numerous suspects in these and earlier bombings, but has prosecuted almost none of them.

The NPA and CPP continue to enact "revolutionary justice" against civilians in areas under their control, including the killing of individuals they consider to be criminals, despotic landlords, or business owners.

Many in the MILF grew increasingly frustrated with the peace process in 2006, and some MILF hardliners reportedly have questioned the wisdom of continuing negotiations. The current MILF leadership, widely viewed as moderate, may be put increasingly under fire if it cannot deliver results in 2007. Some commanders in MILF have become increasingly independent and are now referred to as "lost commands" which are no longer under the authority of MILF leadership.

The Philippines military launched new operations on the island of Jolo in late July and early August 2006, after it was reported that several senior members of Jemaah Islamiyah had taken refuge with the Abu Sayyaf forces there. Observers believe that senior Jemaah Islamiyah operatives linked to the 2002 bombing in Bali, Indonesia and the August 2003 bombing in Jakarta may be in hiding in the southern Philippines.

Military Abuses

Civilians living in militarized zones or areas targeted for counter-insurgency operations are susceptible to harassment, physical assaults, arbitrary arrest, and even torture by the military. Individuals considered to have assisted or to sympathize with the NPA are at particular risk. Harassment by local security forces of human rights groups and activists affiliated with leftist causes, also continues to be of concern.

Migrant Workers

Remittances sent by Filipinos working overseas form a vital part of the nation's economy, contributing around 18 percent of the country's GNP. Many Filipinos, however, find work abroad through unlicensed agents or while on tourist visas, making them more vulnerable to abusive employers in many countries where they work. While not all such workers face problems, few receiving countries closely regulate domestic work and problems such as physical and sexual abuse, forced confinement, non-payment of wages, denial of food and health care, and excessive working hours with no rest days are all too common.

The Philippines, which has ratified the International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers, has done more than many sending countries to protect migrant workers, including through pre-departure awareness programs, services provided by diplomatic missions in receiving countries, and the oversight provided by the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration. The government could do more to improve existing services at embassies abroad, particularly by ensuring adequate staffing levels and access to trauma counseling. It could also improve programs to help integrate returning workers back to the Philippines, and do more to promote regional minimum standards through cooperation with other sending countries.

Key International Actors

The United States remains the closest ally of the Philippines, and military relations are strong. The two countries conduct regular combined military trainings funded by the US government.

A report on the political killings in the Philippines released by Amnesty International in August, 2006, helped focus international attention and pressure on the Philippines government. Numerous foreign civil society and human right groups also conducted research and advocacy missions to the Philippines to investigate the political killings, often focusing on specific classes of victims, such as judges, lawyers, or women.

During an international tour in September, 2006, including Finland, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, President Arroyo faced considerable pressure from European leaders and the European Commission to curtail the killings. Arroyo invited observers from Finland, Spain, and Belgium to investigate the killings.

The Philippines was elected as a member of the new United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2006.