



International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines

<http://www.humanrightsphilippines.net/>

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Australian Chapter: Australian Council of Trade Unions; Maritime Union of Australia, Victorian Branch; SEARCH Foundation; Philippines Australia Union Link; Action for Peace & Development in the Philippines, Migrante Australia

October 30, 2015,

H E Benigno Simeon Aquino III
President of the Republic of the Philippines
Malacañang Palace,
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Manila Philippines
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Condemn torture of three Higaonon civilians in Claveria, Misamis Oriental

Dear Excellency,

The Australian Chapter of the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines calls on your government to take urgent action in response to the torture of three Higaonon civilians from Barangay Mat-I, Claveria, in the province of Misamis Oriental.

According to Katungod Lumad Alert, they were tortured by the military in the wake of an armed encounter between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the New People's Army, on September 28, 2015.

That day, elements of the 58th Infantry Battalion passed by the community without informing any of the community elders or leaders. After the residents heard an exchange of gunfire coming from the direction of the mountainous parts of their domain called Balahan, they hurriedly packed their belongings to leave, fearing stray bullets would hit them.

Three men who had been out gathering wild plants – which the Higaonon people use for various purposes like medicine and spice, among other things – in Balahan had taken cover when they heard the gunfire. When the shooting died down, they went out of their hiding place, thinking that the armed men were already far away. However, the military saw them and they were apprehended. They were accused of being members of the New People's Army (NPA), a communist-led armed group operating in the province.

According to them, they were held at gunpoint and were forced to lie on the ground. They were then bound and blindfolded. The men explained why they were there at the forest but the military insisted that they were members of the NPA. After some time, they were forced to walk with the heavy bags of the military placed on their shoulder. Again, they were accused that they were couriers of the NPA. When they reached the military truck, they had difficulty in boarding because of the ropes and bags. The military hauled them up by their hair.

They were brought to Camp Gabino, a military camp of the 58th IB in Claveria. Inside the camp, they were beaten and asked for names of NPAs. When they passed out from exhaustion, they were doused with water to wake them up.

Before they were finally released, the military took photos of them. Their fingerprints were also taken and they were asked to sign a paper – the contents unknown to them.


Balahan is both an economic and cultural area for the Higaonon of Mat-i. It is where many of the residents' farmlands are, and the forest is where they hunt and forage. Ritual areas can also be found here as it is the practice of the Higaonon to perform a ritual before any major production activity. For a long time, the military has been conducting their operations in these areas, in the ancestral lands of the Higaonon, without having even informed any of the traditional leaders. Worst, the Higaonon dwellers have become suspect of being rebels simply by living in their ancestral domain.

Excellency, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, we urge you to:

1. Publicly condemn the torture of the three Higaonon civilians at Claveria, Misamis Oriental on September 28, 2015
2. Create an independent body to investigate this case of torture
3. Respect and observe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the Philippines is a signatory and party to all the major Human Rights instruments;
4. Junk Oplan Bayanihan, your government's counterinsurgency program that has victimized countless Filipinos.

Finally we call on your administration and all its institutions to uphold the basic human rights of the citizens whom you have sworn to serve.

For human rights and peace,



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Cc

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