

Endorsing murder in the Philippines

Asian Human Rights Commission

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From March 18 to 22, seven alleged criminals were killed, including a 16-year-old boy, in separate shooting incidents reportedly perpetrated by men riding on motorcycles in General Santos City. The police and the city's mayor quickly announced that the killings could have been the result of a conflict within the group of criminals themselves, given that they all have criminal records. Mayor Pedro Acharon Jr. was quoted to have told a local television station: "*Iniisip namin baka sila, kasi nag-o-onsehan na eh*" (We think they themselves are killing each other)".

One of the victims, 16-year old Rolim Dagano, was reported to be on a 'list' of persons allegedly involved in the theft of motorcycles. Prior to this targeted killing, murders of motorcyclists and the subsequent theft of their motorcycles was a widespread problem—at least ten were reported in January alone. Rolim's previous records of theft were also mentioned by the police, to illustrate his supposed involvement in criminal acts, prior to concluding their investigation.

Aside from Rolim however, the remaining victims were not on any 'list' of criminals.

Before these murders took place, the city's police chief, Senior Superintendent Robert Po, issued orders to his field commanders demanding they 'dismantle' the group of criminals involved in motorcycle thefts. Thereafter, these murders started to occur. Victims have been killed in places close to their residences, outside chapels, and even inside their residences in the presence of their relatives. The perpetrators however, have gone unidentified and unpunished for their crimes.

There were sweeping allegations and immediate conclusions justifying these murders, but the police and city mayor have not given any reasonable explanations for their justification, or why this group of people deserve to be killed. When crimes are committed, it is the obligation of the police to investigate and discover who is responsible. Such an investigation does not rest on whether or not the victim possessed a criminal record.

Murder is a criminal act and it is the duty of the police to hold those responsible to account. In failing to do so, they deny victims' families of any remedies, particularly of knowing the circumstances of their loved ones' deaths. Meanwhile, families' claims that their loved ones were not criminals and were not involved in any criminal activity, are not looked into. Families are also forced to live with the stigma of their loved ones being branded as criminals. They are deprived of equality before the law and equal protection by the law, because the law enforcement authorities themselves have justified the murders, concluding they were nothing but a 'war amongst criminals'.

In fact, the justification of these murders has given blanket impunity to the perpetrators, who continue to shoot their targets in public. The police and city mayor's premature conclusion of these murders not only endorses murder for a certain sector of society, but it also dilutes the notion that police authorities have a responsibility to investigate all crimes and punish offenders. They have abandoned their fundamental responsibility of protecting the lives of all citizens—whether a criminal or not.

If, as the police and the mayor have pointed out, the seven murders were a result of 'gang warfare', then the authorities should have a starting point for their investigations. They should be able to find enough information to identify, arrest and charge the perpetrators in court. That no one has yet been charged for these murders questions the credibility of the police, whose failure to take appropriate action serves as alleged complicity in the murders.

The police should also explain the existence of the reported 'list' of criminals, and how they came about it. Is the listing of persons as alleged criminals involved in motorcycle thefts a sanction to murder them?