

Documenting the slaughter of innocents

Danilo Reyes

Apart from the constant murders of human rights and social activists in the Philippines, there have also been many—largely unnoticed—forms of arbitrary deprivation of life taking place, which are claiming dozens, if not hundreds, of lives.

The pretexts for this arbitrary deprivation include the following:

‘Legitimate encounter’

Individuals who lose their lives in ‘legitimate encounters’ are usually civilians who have been killed on the pretext of an armed encounter between security forces, soldiers and/or police, and illegal armed groups, rebel or ‘terrorist’ groups.

‘Vigilante killings’

This term initially referred to killings committed by the notorious group ‘Davao Deaths Squads’, or the ‘DDS’. Their victims are persons accused of being involved in criminal activities or gang warfare. Former detainees, recidivist offenders, or those with criminal records have also lost their lives in this manner.

With similar violence now also occurring in Davao’s neighboring cities, ‘DDS’ has evolved into Dadiangas Death Squads and Digos Death Squads—Dadiangas and Digos being two cities near Davao.

‘Gang war’

Deaths supposedly motivated by gang rivalry are quickly dismissed under this term. However, most victims’ deaths are being concluded as such even prior to any thorough investigation. There are also claims that the killers could have been hired by security forces themselves, or have links with rogue police.

‘Shootout/Rubout’

The deaths of crime suspects, often during police operations, are explained under this category. In a ‘shootout’, individuals are killed because they fought or traded bullets with the police. A ‘rubout’ is the opposite; as the Philippines Commission on Human Rights describes, it is a summary killing.

If a death occurs as a result of a shootout, the police are not accountable. There have been several deaths however, where persons were killed without putting up a firefight at all.

Regardless of how these deaths are termed, they all constitute an arbitrary deprivation of life, and are an obvious result of the police and government’s failure to protect citizens’ lives, and to hold those responsible to account. The state’s inability to undertake effective investigations in these cases, to identify perpetrators and provide witness protection has further fueled such arbitrary deaths in the country.

To document and expose how certain classes of society are being systematically killed, a blog entitled ‘Slaughter of Innocents’ has been launched. It can be accessed at: <http://noprotection.blog.humanrights.asia>