

A dirty war with innocents caught in the middle



Estrella Basilico appeals for the release of her son and nephew Jef Tupas, Davao City

Philippines. Estrella Basilico's voice faltered as tears welled in her eyes. But holding them back, she looked at the camera and wasted no time in pleading for help. Her words sharp, but also filled with emotion, filled the room.

“Please help us. My son and my nephew did nothing wrong. They are not rebels. They are civilians,” Estrella said.

John, her 17-year-old son, was arrested by soldiers on July 22 in Loreto in, Agusan del Sur province. John's cousin, 16-year-old Allan was also detained.

The arrests occurred while the rest of the country awaited President Benigno Aquino's fourth State of the Nation address.

Earlier, New York-based Human Rights Watch had asked Aquino to use his speech to present plans to address human rights abuses and the "culture of impunity" in the country.

The military say John and Allan are members of the New People's Army, the armed group of the country's Communist Party.

A military spokesman, Colonel Leo Bongosia, said the two teenagers were "positively identified" by witnesses as having participated in the killing of a village leader on July 19.

The two are now being held by the government's Social Welfare office, but not before they were allegedly tortured.

Ronald Sanglid, 19, who was with the boys but escaped being arrested, said the three of them were on their way to Loreto town center to register for elections in October.

He said while they walking they spotted someone with a squad of soldiers who pointed at them and shouted, "Kill them all. They're rebels."

"The soldiers told us to drop and hogtied us. Then we heard gun shots and then they told us that we had ambushed them. But there was no exchange of fire. They were making it up," Sanglid said.

Sanglid was later rescued by his aunt. He was spared, he claimed, because his cousin was married to the son of the slain village leader.

Estrella later said her son's upper lip had a burn mark. There were also contusions on different parts of his body. "They were cigarette burns," she said.

Col Bongosia denied the allegations. "They might have some injuries which they probably got while they were being pursued by troops," he said.

"It is not true that they were tortured. Nothing like that happened."

Estrella said the incident has instilled fear in her local community. She said her son, her nephew and the entire Agusanon tribal community have become victims of the government's war against communist insurgents.

"Soldiers enter our villages, seek us out and interrogate us about the rebels. Why us? They enter our houses and threaten us and arrest people based on unfounded allegations," Estrella said.

Human rights group Karapatan said John and Allan are the youngest documented victims of arbitrary detention and torture by soldiers in southern Mindanao.

Hanimay Suazo, who heads Karapatan's office in the region, said the two boys are the latest additions to a growing list of detainees related to the country's four-decade insurgency.

"We already have 33 political detainees [in southern Mindanao]. John and Allan are the 32nd and 33rd," Suazo said.

The troubles faced by the Agusanons mirror the struggle of other indigenous peoples in the southern Philippines caught in the middle of the insurgency.

The government accuses tribesmen of being rebels who allegedly "manipulate" people in the hinterlands to join them.

Indigenous peoples group, the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA), last week sought help from the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on escalating human rights abuses against tribal communities.

Windel Bolinget, CPA chairman, said scale of the abuses has become alarming.

He said one of the reasons behind them has been the militarization of indigenous communities through the government's counter-insurgency program.

According to the CPA, since the implementation of the anti-insurgency program in 2010, some 35 cases of extrajudicial killings of indigenous peoples and one enforced disappearance have been recorded.

From July 2010 to October 2012, more than 1,000 indigenous families and 600 individuals were forcibly evacuated from their villages to make way for massive military air and ground operations.

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