

Human Rights Situation amidst 'War on Terrorism' and the Deepening Economic Crisis in the Philippines *

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The 16th of November massacre at Hacienda Luisita highlights the human rights situation in the Philippines today. 14 strikers were confirmed dead; 9 of them died because of gunshot wounds, 2 were children who died by suffocation because of tear gas. Aside from those who are killed, the violent dispersal of farm workers by the police and the military injured at least 114 workers, unlawfully detained 110 and caused disappearance of 39 others.

'Open terror' is how we describe the current human rights situation in the country under the Macapagal-Arroyo regime, which continuously suppresses genuine people's rights, freedom and legitimate voice.

In order to understand the current human rights situation in the country, it is important to place human rights issue on a broader political and socio-economic context. This context includes: (1) the worsening financial and economic crisis in the country and the present living conditions of the Filipino people; (2) the government's unquestioning support for the US military intervention and its 'war on terrorism'; and (3) Australia's continuing role and support on the US-led global 'war on terrorism' in the Asia-pacific region.

Worsening economic crisis and people's right to live

The economic crisis in the Philippines today is, perhaps, the worst ever recorded in the history of the country. And yet the government has not done anything to alleviate the economic situation of the common people; but instead would even pass the burden of solving the crisis to the people, with increases in taxes and prices such as those of electric power, petroleum and basic commodities.

As of April this year, 11 million Filipinos are either out of work or are otherwise not working enough for a decent living.¹ The unemployment rate is now on its all-time high of 14 percent compared to last April 2003's 12.2 percent, and is considered the worst in 50 years. The unemployment is so entrenched that Filipinos continue to leave the country for job overseas.² This should not surprise us because even those who are better off than the average workers, such as doctors and nurses, are now forced to work abroad because of lack of employment opportunities at home. Figures from World Health Organisation (WHO) show that in 2003, 250,000 Filipino nurses were reported to have been relocated in the US, Canada, UK and other western countries including Australia.

Under the present administration, the gap between daily minimum wage and the value of basic daily requirements has grown even wider. The daily minimum wage in the National Capital Region (NCR) is presently P250 a day; but at present, it is estimated that the income required to enable a family of six (the average size of a Filipino family) to live decently (above poverty level) is P479 per day. It is far worse in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) where a family of six needs eight wage earners in order to live decently. The reason is that the daily minimum wage rate in the region has remained unchanged at P140 since

* Spoken at the 'International Human Rights Day Celebration' organised by Philippines-Australia Solidarity Association (PASA), Migrante Melbourne and Gabriela Australia on 12 December 2004 at Church Hall, Footscray, Melbourne, Australia.

¹ The 11 million jobless include 5 million who are totally unemployed and 6 million who are underemployed.

² It is estimated that about 3,000 Filipinos depart each day to find work in other countries.

1998, making it the lowest in the entire country. Imagine how could a family of six survive on a wage that is currently below the poverty level?

Poverty and hunger has also worsened under the present regime. Filipinos living below the poverty line have increased from 57 percent of total Filipino families in 1975 to 70 percent in 1998 then to 85 percent in 2003. But despite of the deteriorating conditions of the majority of the people, the budget for social services continues to be cut by the government through the years of accommodating the payment of foreign debt.

At the moment, the Philippine government is under IMF control to give priority to automatic debt servicing of nearly 70 percent of the national budget, to raise the tax burden, reduce deficit spending and adopt austerity measures – all at the expense of the people.

'War on terrorism' and people's national democratic rights and aspirations

It was imperative for the Macapagal-Arroyo regime to strengthen the 'weak state' to suppress the people's unrest, who now bears the burden of the deepening economic crisis. The so-called 'strong republic' was conceived in order to pre-emptively strike any threat to the elite's rule, detain dissidents, and wage an all out war against Muslim separatist movement in southern Philippines and the national democratic armed struggle being waged by Communists Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA).

With the present 'terrorist hysteria', President Arroyo last month urged the Congress to pass the Anti-Terrorism Bill. We knew that this Bill would only be used to give more teeth to present repressive laws and instruments, many of them dating back to the Marcos dictatorship, and to silence militant labour, peasant, church and other sectoral and progressive organisations. The Bill, as we are all aware, is an authoritarian measure that, in the guise of 'fighting terrorism', is actually meant to curtail freedom of expression and other civil and political rights and liberties.

In the Philippines, we do not really have to look at the Bill to say that the suppression of people's rights is threatened. In fact, people's democratic rights continue to be suppressed particularly in the labour front and in the rural countryside where human rights violations are massive and ever-increasing.

KARAPATAN, a human rights grass root organisation in the Philippines, reported that in less than three years, the military and the police under the Macapagal-Arroyo regime have committed 3,133 cases of human rights violations victimising at least 172,281 individuals including 17,201 families. As of August this year, there were 319 victims of summary execution and massacre; 1,191 victims of illegal arrest and detention; 113,211 cases of force evacuation and displacement; 1,236 victims of hamletting; and 14 human rights workers have been summarily executed. As of July this year, there are 248 political prisoners all over the country. And now her regime is about to execute by lethal injection another human rights advocate; with him on death row are three other political prisoners.

The brutal attack on the people and the increasing human rights violations are all being done on the pre-text of 'war on terrorism'. The US, the Philippines and the Australian governments are now collaborating to upgrade and expand their anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism measures in the region. Indeed, the current APEC summit in Chile held in November 2004 did not only tackle regional trade which is supposed to be its main concern, but also the US led 'war on terrorism', as some observers noted, what should have been an economic summit became an 'anti-terror' summit.

Australia's role in the region

Australia's continuing role in the US led 'war on terrorism' is indeed a matter of great concern for the people of the region. Prime Minister John Howard's declaration of his 'pre-emptive strike' doctrine (Australia's right to intervene in so-called 'failed states' and emphasis on unilateral military action rather than multilateral dialogue) and the Australian Federal Police Commissioner Michael Keelty's readiness to send Australian forces to the Philippines during

the 2003 coup attempt highlight the drift towards a policy of military intervention and aggression overseas.

In July 2003, John Howard visited the Philippines and signed an Australian-Philippines anti-terror agreement. The Australian government even gave a donation of five million Australian dollars to the Philippines' 'anti-terror' machinery. In fact, Australian aid to the 'war on terror' in the Philippines is aiding a government that represses its own people, something which Australian people (taxpayers) never consented to do.

Following the US footsteps, the Howard government has further misrepresented as 'terrorists' progressive and democratic organisations in the Philippines and their leaders including National Democratic Front of the Philippines' (NDFP) and its chief political consultant, José Maria Sison, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed-wing, the New People's Army (NPA). Terrorist tagging will not contribute to genuine and lasting peace in the country, but instead, is a major stumbling block towards the resumption of formal peace talks between the Philippine government and the said organisations.

Conclusion

This is the time for all Australians and Filipinos to demand an end to human rights violations in the Philippines and other countries in the world. The US-led 'war on terrorism', with the support of the Philippines and Australian government, would not do any good, but actually threatens and harm the people's rights in the region.

The people of the Philippines would like to see Australia's leadership on renouncing war and aggression as an instrument of national policy. The people in the region would like to see Australia advancing the principles and aspirations of peace, justice, equality, racial harmony, fairness and compassion. We would like to see Australia as upholding the universal principles of human rights and supportive of the Charter of the United Nations and other international instruments at home and abroad.