

Analysis

# Philippines: Gov't reluctant to crack down on Ampatuans

Monday 30 November 2009, by [DORONILA Amando](#) (Date first published: 30 November 2009).

The government has come under fire from the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) for an “overly cautious response” to the massacre of 57 people in Maguindanao as it attempted to reassert its authority over feuding warlords.

CHR Chair Leila de Lima found the arrest of the principal suspect, Mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr. of Datu Unsay town, came “rather slowly”—three days after the massacre—amid mounting evidence that he was the mastermind and that he participated in the slaughter and signs that the government was coddling other members of the Ampatuan clan.

The Ampatuan family, a political ally of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, has clamped tight control on the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) since 2001.

The CHR, which has no executive powers on law enforcement and judicial administration, stepped up its pressure on the government to act “decisively” in prosecuting those responsible for the massacre after Ms Arroyo gave Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno sweeping authority to exercise administrative control over the ARMM, center of the turmoil over the massacre.

Puno was given the power to suspend all officials who may have had a role in the crime, including members of the Ampatuan clan who are now holding elective positions in the ARMM.

The President cloaked Puno with “full powers of supervision” after she had a meeting with Puno, National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales and acting Justice Secretary Agnes Devanadera on Friday.

Ms Arroyo directed the three officials to employ the “full machinery” of the government to arrest the suspects and protect witnesses, saying this was the only way for the country to redeem its honor before the world as a civilized and democratic society.

Often a pain on the side of executive department officials responsible for the administration of justice and law and order on the issue of violation of human rights, De Lima said on Saturday that in the face of mounting evidence, the executive department should move faster and take more decisive action, such as the immediate suspension of Maguindanao Gov. Andal Ampatuan Sr. and his son, Zaldy, governor of the ARMM.

## Independent probe panel

The CHR chair also suggested the formation of an independent commission to investigate the massacre, and the issuance of a writ of amparo to protect journalists, investigators and witnesses.

De Lima pointed out that many options were available to the President, but she appeared reluctant to use them, including preventive suspension under the Local Government Code against Governor

Ampatuan and other local officials.

For example, De Lima pointed out the presence of heavy excavation equipment at the scene of the crime (the backhoe which dug the grave where the murdered victims were thrown and covered with soil), should have compelled the President to demand an explanation from Ampatuan Sr. The equipment was owned by the Maguindanao province.

“How public property could have been used to conceal such brutal and heinous acts requires an immediate explanation from the local governments. There are several actors who must be held accountable for the massacre and the aftermath of it,” she said.

De Lima added that it was not sufficient to charge Ampatuan Jr. with multiple murder for the massacre of the caravan of relatives, journalists and political supporters of Vice Mayor Esmael Mangudadatu of Buluan town en route to the Commission on Elections office to file his certificate of candidacy for governor of Maguindanao. That put him in collision with the clan with whom his family has had a running blood feud since 2001 for control of the province.

### **Silk gloves treatment**

Despite the broad powers given by the President, Puno did not appear too eager to use them to crack down on the Ampatuans and cut them to size.

Rejecting allegations that the government was treating the Ampatuans with silk gloves, Puno said he didn't want to “rush into things,” by suspending officials until an investigating team formed the other day to go into the bottom of the massacre had completed its inquiry, which is not expected to deliver early results.

Puno said the authorization from the President would provide him with more muscle to protect evidence from being tampered with and witnesses from being intimidated.

### **Enhanced economic base**

It has been established that the Ampatuans had helped Ms Arroyo win the election in 2004, when she took more than 75 percent of the vote in the province. In the 2007 mid-term election, the President's allies in Maguindanao delivered a 12-0 vote in favor of administration candidates, locking her in political debt with the Ampatuans.

The electoral debt opened the way for the grant of executive favors that enhanced economic resources of her warlords, enabling them to obtain reciprocal loyalty from their constituencies. They were given access to government revenue, consisting of internal revenue allotments, and monopoly over underground and illegal activities in the shadow economy, including drug smuggling and other contraband transactions.

This enhancement of the warlords' economic base has enabled them to maintain private armies, that were not under the control of the army and the national police and to commit crime with impunity.

The military and police, acting under orders from Manila, made a token of dismantling the private armed groups and disarming them.

Troops took over government buildings in towns controlled by the Ampatuans and disarmed close to 400 militiamen loyal to the clan. But the local warlords made a mockery of the turnover of their weapons. They surrendered old weapons.

## **‘Strong republic’**

The Financial Times reports the farce: “It’s laughable when you compare the old weapons that were confiscated by the military shown in TV news, with the modern, shining weapons their bodyguards carry around in the city,” according to one city resident.

According to the report, Col. Jonathan Ponce, a military spokesperson in Cotabato City, said: “What we got so far are the M-14 and M-16 rifles that we also gave to the special auxiliary forces that the province organized to help the Army fight the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

“It’s up to the national police to get back the other so-called high-powered that may still be with them.”

Can the national police do it? There goes your slogan of a “strong Republic.”

**By Amando Doronila**

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