

To protect human life we must stand against the death squads

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Several years ago I was sued for libel by the former mayor of Davao City because I began an international letter writing campaign asking him to investigate the killings of street children by the so - called Davao Death Squad. Mayor De Guzman was so angered by the flood of letters especially from Filipinos abroad, who were shocked at the killings that included dozens of street children. He filed a case against me and Preda human right workers.

After a year, I won the case but tragically the killings still go on today even children are not spared. Evidence off this was recently shown on ITN and CNN international news channel last February 2006.

The present Mayor of Davao City Rodrigo Duterte, has denied any links to the killings although not vehemently. He still says they are a good thing to combat crime. Duterte publicly told a crime summit at the Manila Hotel in July of last year: "Summary execution of criminals remains the most effective way to crush kidnapping and illegal drugs."

When amnesty International brought his name to the attention of the world in its letter to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo last August, he reacted strongly and told them to mind their own business, which is exactly what they were doing. He said he had the answer to crime. "This is our problem, and we will solve it my way," he is reported as saying.

Last year a prominent human rights defender was shot dead on the street in Davao on his way to a meeting about the death squads. The human rights NGO, FIND, bravely lived up to its name and found the bodies of several people including children buried in shallow graves on waste land known as the "Firing Range". The rule of the gun, not that of law spreads terror and fear as anyone can be accused and shot.

Many business people and civic leaders applaud the death squads. A leading businessman, Robert Te told the *Mindanao Times* "We're more confident to operate in a peaceful Davao, free from criminals, drug syndicates and terrorists," The death penalty has been suspended but it is imposed almost daily by the death squads.

As many as 247 deaths by execution were recorded up to December 2005 many of them youth and minors. Some were as young as 15. The finger pointing goes on and anyone can be a victim of false accusation and marked for death. Many journalists have been assassinated too. The Philippines is one of the most dangerous places in the world for Journalists, according to Reporters without Frontiers.

When the rule of law is cast aside by the oligarchy then civilised life is not truly possible, without morality and human rights only an empty shell of a corrupt society remains. A failed state is in the making. I have received death threats in my missionary career and it is a scary thing but we journalists can't stop writing because fear and evil would win and terror, not truth, would rule the land.

The appointment of Mayor Rodrigo Duterte as a security advisor to the President for the region enhanced his reputation and has given the presidential stamp of approval to the death squads critics say but the president has denied any such approval.

The assassination and execution squads have sprung up in other towns and cities and if it were orchestrated from on high. But assassination squads are also active in the killing of students, farmers and trade union activists. The brutal slaying on a picket line of the union leader protesting unfair trade practices of Nestle shocked the Fair Trade movement. Nestle boasts it is a FLO certified Fair trade coffee retailer. FLO has a lot to explain and answer for.

Hundreds of people have been killed all over the country by execution squads. In Cebu, 104 people were killed by execution squads between November 2004 and December 2005. In Metro Manila similar killings are standard practice it seems. It's called "Salvaging". Four police officers were arrested recently for "execution-slayings".

The President released a statement saying "Salvaging has no place in a civilised society where we value human life and protect human rights". Now if only that were the reality this would be a far safer and crime free country. (End)