

“Duterte’s dirty drug war” - Philippines secret death squads: officer claims police teams behind wave of killings

Philippines police chief, Ronald Dela Rosa, denies state killings

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Exclusive: Thousands of people have been killed since Rodrigo Duterte became president and, according to one officer, secret police teams are partly responsible.

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“We are not that bad policemen or bad individuals. We are just a tool, we are just angels that God gave talent to, you know, to get these bad souls back to heaven and cleanse them.”

The words flow unnervingly from the mouth of the policeman, a senior officer in the Philippines national police (PNP), as he explains his role in 87 killings in the past three months.

It’s not about killing for pleasure, or being a “homicidal maniac”, he says. There is a higher purpose at play.

“We are here as angels. Like St Michael and St Gabriel, right,” he says.

Well in excess of 3,600 people have been killed in the Philippines since 1 July this year, when Rodrigo Duterte was inaugurated as president and initiated his war on drugs and crime. More than half of those murders have been perpetrated by unknown vigilantes.

The mass killings have sparked international concern; from the United Nations to Barack Obama and his US administration, as well as from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Amnesty has issued warnings about the “climate of lawlessness and fear that has gripped the country”.

They have unleashed the beast from the cage ... to neutralise those criminals
Senior police officer

The fear is that the Philippines has slipped into an era of the death squad. The situation is unlikely to have been helped by the president’s own words and allegations made against him. Last week Duterte, after citing Hitler and the Holocaust, said he would happily “slaughter” three million drug addicts [1].

That was preceded by a revealing testimony at an ongoing senate inquiry last month, where a self-confessed assassin testified that Duterte, in his previous incarnation as the longtime mayor of the city of Davao, had ordered the killing of criminals and his opponents – and in one case even personally “finished off” an employee from the justice department with a sub-machine gun.

Reports of such macabre acts have only added weight to stories about assassins currently employed by police to get rid of suspected drug pushers.

Now, for the first time, a serving officer is revealing the inner workings of what he claims is an officially sanctioned, albeit secret, campaign to rid the streets of unwanted citizens.

In the past three months he claims dozens of individuals have been killed – or in Philippine police talk, “neutralised” – by this officer and his “special ops” team alone.

It is the unknown side of Duterte’s dirty drug war – but it hasn’t come out of nowhere.

Death comes after a phone call

The police officer sits beyond a beaded curtain in the back room of a Manila brothel as he begins to tell the story of his job.

The officer, who the *Guardian* has independently verified as an active member of the national force, appears at ease here. He feels secure and chose this place to talk.

“Sometimes I just come here for a good night’s sleep,” he jokes, eyeing the single mattress in the nondescript private room, the old air conditioner the only thing on the walls, humming noisily in the tropical heat.

Later he says brothels are discreet places for discussions that he doesn’t want anyone to hear.

But first he reveals what for many will be shocking details of his employment in a death squad.

“They have created us. The term is ‘they have unleashed the beast from the cage’ right, to neutralise those criminals,” he says.

The officer claims he is part of one of 10 newly formed and highly secretive police special operations teams, each with 16 members.

He claims the teams are coordinated to execute a list of targets: suspected drug users, dealers and criminals.

The killings mostly take place at night, he says, with the officers hooded and dressed in all black. They set their watches, giving themselves one minute or two to extract target individuals from their houses and kill on the spot – swift, precise, no witnesses.

He claims they then dump the bodies – in the next town or under a bridge – or they plaster masking tape around the head of the corpse and place a cardboard sign on the body that reads “drug lord” or “pusher”.

“We put placards in order for the media, in order for those investigating [the] bodies to redirect their investigation,” he explains, leading them to think: “Why should I investigate this guy, he is a drug pusher, he is a rapist, never mind with that one, I will just investigate the others. It’s a good

thing for him that happened to him.”

In the Philippines they have a term for it: “salvage” victim. Someone killed and dumped in the street or thrown in the river. A corpse that is later salvaged.

There have been many killings lately, the officer jokes, that these days you can easily get away with any kind of murder: “You can kill him, put masking tape on him and everybody is going to think that guy is a drug pusher.”

The officer says he was first deployed just after Duterte was elected to his special operations team, which was being formed for national security.

He recalls his first meeting in which superiors allegedly described what was to happen next.

“And then they are briefing us that, ‘From now on it will be a different story. All those pending cases that identified hardened criminals on drugs and hardened murderers, we are going to have to neutralise them, so that’s the order. We need your special skills.’”

He says the team leader is contacted via radio and a specific code - each special ops officer is known by a numeric code - and told to report to base. There they are given a dossier of targets, files of drug dealers, users and criminals to “neutralise”.

“Like, for example, they will send us a picture, a profile of this individual,” explains the officer. “Automatically, one or two of my team will go to the place where this individual dwells and then of course first we are going to conduct background checks.”

Just because you’re a journalist you are not exempted from assassination if you’re a son of a bitch - Rodrigo Duterte

The team investigates the individuals to determine whether they are involved in drug dealing or other illegal activities, whether they are “God-fearing” or a “parasite”, and then acts accordingly.

“So that’s how we weigh him, so maybe we conduct our own justice,” he says. “And of course the government is ordering us to do so.”

The officer, dressed in a red sports shirt and jeans, argues the special ops teams are doing a service for society, perhaps giving a hint at his motivation for speaking about such a sensitive subject.

“We are the kind of policemen that we don’t just kill for pleasure,” he explains. “But if we think this is a hardened individual or hardened criminal who makes his living as a parasite to others, well we will have no conscience. We are going to give him the worst death [so] that even Satan cannot look straightforward to him because he has a very bad death.”

The allegations from the officer are shocking. And although the *Guardian* can verify the policeman’s rank and his service history, there is no independent, official confirmation for the allegations of state complicity and police coordination in mass murder.

Operation Double Barrel

The environment in which the wave of killings is happening in the Philippines is murky and complicated, with several groups involved.

First, under operation “Double Barrel”, the police have been given a licence from the president to crack down on drugs and crime.

Duterte has instructed the police to double, “triple their efforts if need be”, and promised to grant amnesty to any officers involved if they somehow find themselves on the wrong side of the law as a result.

Next come the vigilantes, and the more than 2,200 murders perpetrated by these unknown assassins. The deaths have been put down to gangs, thugs and drug lords capitalising on the killing spree to get rid of rivals and enemies.

The police have also admitted that corrupt officers, with the aim of protecting their narcotics rackets, could also be behind some of the vigilante killings.

Then, most frightening and ominous, according to the officer who spoke to the Guardian, is the third category - highly orchestrated and trained state-sanctioned police death squads, such as the one this officer claims to be part of.

For months now the news has been filled with a steady stream of grisly images, daily photographs of blood-splattered dead bodies shot and slumped in the street. One local newspaper, the *Inquirer*, has even started a “kill list” in an attempt to document the killings across the country [2].

Of the 3,600-plus deaths so far, 1,375 have been killed in above-board police operations, while about 2,233 more have been put down to vigilantes, according to the latest statistics from the PNP from early September.

The PNP says it is investigating the vigilantes, but so far there are no reports that any have been arrested.

Duterte’s ultimatum

Inaugurated on 30 June, Duterte had been elected on a promise to rid the south-east Asian nation of drugs and crime within six months of taking office.

The president has joked about fattening up the fish of Manila Bay with the corpses of drug dealers, and vowed the drug war won’t stop “until the last drug lord, last financier and last pusher have surrendered - or put behind bars, or below the ground if they so wish”.

But it is not just the surge in killings on his watch that has invited international condemnation. Duterte’s penchant for outlandish statements and insults, even of global leaders, has stunned the global community.

Ahead of a planned meeting with the US president, Barack Obama, on the sidelines of an Asean meeting in Laos this August, Duterte branded his US counterpart a “son of a whore” for signalling his intention to talk about human rights amid the spate of killings [3].

Before that it was UN officials and the US ambassador to the Philippines.

In June it was the press. “Just because you’re a journalist you are not exempted from assassination if you’re a son of a bitch,” he said. He later retracted that [4], saying he did not condone the killing of journalists, and he also rowed back on his Obama comments, saying the insult was not directed at the president. It was the same with the Jewish community too and his Holocaust comment. Duterte,

after the fact, apparently didn't mean what he said.

But the more criticism that flies in from abroad, the more impervious the president has become – warning global leaders not to mess with Philippine sovereignty, while setting out to undermine and publicly ridicule anyone who questions him.

So far he appears to have the public on his side – a July poll by Pulse Asia Research showed his approval rating at 91% [5].

Indeed, in Manila talk of state-sanctioned death squads doesn't raise many eyebrows. "Only in the Philippines" was an oft-heard refrain.

The Davao model

As mayor of Davao, a city in Mindanao in the southern Philippines, Duterte developed a reputation both for curbing crime and for links to the alleged Davao death squads (DDS) that executed drug dealers, petty criminals and street children, some of whom were part of gangs.

Impunity for such crimes was almost absolute according to a 2009 report by Human Rights Watch. Entitled *You Can Die At Any Time* [6], it detailed evidence of complicity and at times direct involvement between government officials and the police in the squads. That same year Duterte said that criminals were a "legitimate target of assassination".

According to the report, police officers would give death squad members lists of targets. After being notified of the murders by members of the public, authorities were slow to respond, even when they occurred just minutes away from police stations.

The report describes how the Davao police often failed to collect obvious pieces of evidence such as used bullet casings or question witnesses or suspects, instead pressuring the families of victims to identify the killers. Investigations went nowhere.

In 2012 the Commission on Human Rights recommended the ombudsman investigate Duterte for criminal liability in relation to the killings, but no charges were ever brought and no evidence found.

Instead 21 police officers were reportedly fined the equivalent of one month's salary after they were found guilty of neglecting their duty.

The chief of the PNP, Ronald dela Rosa – the former city police chief of Davao who was handpicked for the national job by Duterte – has, like the government, denied the existence of the DDS.

Even after the stunning allegations at the senate hearing when Duterte's name was directly linked to mass killings, Dela Rosa dismissed the DDS as a "creation of the media".

Davao is not the only place where it is claimed that death squads have operated and the concern now is that the tactics allegedly used in that city have been scaled up nationwide.

"I think it's extremely credible," says Brad Adams, the executive director of the Asia division at Human Rights Watch, speaking both about that notion and the claims of the police officer in his Guardian interview.

"That police officers are given a list of targets to kill is not shocking or surprising. It is however important, essential, that the police admit this so that Duterte can't hide behind the idea that this is

all the work of vigilantes and non-state actors.

“There is no doubt there is state sponsorship and police involvement,” Adams claims. “We were concerned about Davao being replicated or metastasising around the country.”.

Human rights: ‘only for good guys’

At the Philippines national police headquarters, even the police themselves admit active officers could be behind a number of the vigilante killings. A police briefing document on project Double Barrel shows that from 1 July to 16 August, 250 officers were relieved from their duties in metro Manila because of suspected links to the drug trade.

But any official relationship between police and vigilantes - such as the one described by the officer to the *Guardian* - are denied.

The Philippine National Police was contacted on numerous occasions by the *Guardian* to comment on the allegations detailed in this story. Although they did acknowledge requests from the *Guardian* regarding the matter, no official comment was forthcoming.

But the previous responses from Duterte himself to allegations of involvement in death squads have been strong.

He has called them lies and “accusations of a madman” and previously stated that there were “no Davao death squads”.

Martin Andanar, Duterte’s communications secretary, said of the Davao allegations: “The Commission on Human Rights already conducted an investigation years ago, when the president was still a mayor, and charges were not filed, they did not see any direct evidence.”

When contacted by the *Guardian* to respond to the specific allegations of the police officer, presidential spokesperson Ernesto Abella said he was unable to comment.

“I cannot make any comments regarding that,” he said. “There are so-called sources and we cannot verify what they are saying, they have not made an affidavit. I cannot make any statement because it is not verified.”

For Arsenio “Boy” Evangelista Jr, spokesman for the group Victims against Crime and Corruption, the denials and no comments mean little.

“Who would have the skills and the guts to do this?” he says when he talks about the mass killings.

“I am talking of police skills, all the skills, like intelligence, proficiency in handling firearms,” says Evangelista, who six years after his son was killed in a brutal crime is still waiting for someone to be charged. “Because that’s what is happening lately. It’s practically perfect. No witnesses - it is being done very accurate, swift.”

At the Philippines Commission on Human Rights, Chito Gascon, its chairman, is asked about the allegations of police acting as judge, jury and executioner. He too is unfazed.

“I am not surprised, I have heard of this. But the problem is we need to prove it.

“And it probably follows a playbook that has been used before, like in Davao.”

Gascon says he is grappling with the new president's apparent take on human rights: if you're a good guy, you get them; if you're a bad guy, you don't.

It's a slippery slope but this appears to be the logic at the heart of the surge in killings: the justification necessary to rid the country of the scourge of drugs and crime, the end that justifies the means.

In his Manila brothel the police officer admits that he too contemplates that very point.

"Maybe, I am just having, what do you call it, just pretending that we are right. But we are not homicidal maniacs right now.

"I told you a while ago, we pray, we always go to the church, and ask forgiveness to God for what we are doing right now. We are sorry for doing it. But whoever gonna do it for the Filipino people?"

Kate Lamb in Manila

* The Guardian. Tuesday 4 October 2016 04.35 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/04/philippines-secret-death-squads-police-officer-team-s-behind-killings>

Why would we need a hit squad? Philippines police chief denies state killings

Director general Ronald Dela Rosa says allegations by a senior officer interviewed by the *Guardian* are untrue.

The chief of the Philippine national police has issued a vehement denial of allegations of secretive state sanctioned death squads revealed by the *Guardian*.

Ronald Dela Rosa responded to questioning about the report based on an interview with a senior officer in the force who claimed he led one of 10 special operations teams, each with 16 members, tasked with killing suspected drug users, dealers and criminals.

The officer claimed the hit squads are composed of active police officers and that the murders are conducted in such a way as to make them appear to be perpetrated by "vigilantes" to deliberately obscure police involvement and investigation.

"For the record, I vehemently deny such formation of a hit squad," Dela Rosa told reporters in Manila.

"Why would you need to form a hit squad when you can use the regular performance duties of a regular cop for anti-illegal drugs operations? Why would you need a hit squad?" the director-general added.

The *Guardian* report included allegations that lists of targets to "neutralise" are given to the teams by their police superiors.

Since the country's new president, Rodrigo Duterte, initiated his war on drugs three months ago

more than 3,600 people have been killed - 1,390 in police operations and 2,294 by purported vigilantes.

In an apparent endorsement by Filipinos of his policies, an independent survey showed on Thursday that Duterte's is still immensely popular.

Just over 75% percent of Filipinos polled by Social Weather Stations said they were "satisfied" with Duterte's performance, with 11% reporting being "dissatisfied"

Dela Rosa, meanwhile, rejected the claims about death squads, calling instead for the *Guardian* to reveal its source.

"I'll tell the reporter that the report is a hoax. She is inventing her story if she doesn't tell me who that senior police official is," said Dela Rosa, as quoted in Rappler.com [7].

The *Guardian* went to extensive lengths to independently verify the officer was an active officer in the Philippine police force and key details about the officer's service history and rank were also confirmed.

The interview was conducted on the condition of anonymity to protect the safety of those involved.

Responding to the allegations, Dela Rosa also chastised the officer for tarnishing the reputation of the PNP.

"I hope the writer presents to me that official," he said, "And the official making those claims, I hope he has balls. You're an official and that's what you do, destroy the organisation? What kind of official are you? You have no balls."

Dela Rosa, also as known as "Bato" or "the rock", was formerly the police chief of Davao, a city in Mindanao that has long been dogged by allegations of police-linked death squads.

Duterte, who was mayor of Davao for more than two decades before becoming president, handpicked Dela Rosa for the national role.

Dela Rosa has defiantly defended the president's drug war and at time echoed his inflammatory remarks. In August he urged Filipinos to douse the houses of drug lords with gasoline and set them on fire, a statement for which he later apologised.

Despite the wave of international criticism over the thousands of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines over recent months, Dela Rosa insisted this week the police are winning the war on drugs.

"I'm very proud to say that despite all the criticisms and noises, extrajudicial killings and summary killings accusations against me and the PNP, things like that, still we face our mission with more courage because I know that we are working for the people," he said.

Kate Lamb

* The Guardian. Thursday 6 October 2016 06.08 BST Last modified on Thursday 6 October 2016 07.01 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/why-would-we-need-a-hit-squad-philippines-police-chief-denies-state-killings>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 39088), [“Happy to slaughter”: Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte vows to kill 3 million drug addicts and likens himself to Hitler.](#)

[2] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/794598/kill-list-drugs-duterte>

[3] See on ESSF (article 38912), [Polemics on extrajudicial killings: Barack Obama cancels meeting after Philippines president calls him ‘son of a whore’.](#)

[4] <http://europe.newsweek.com/philippines-president-elect-rodrigo-duterte-now-vowing-protect-journalists-467910?rm=eu>

[5] <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/07/20/1604814/91-filipinos-trust-duterte-pulse-asia>

[6] https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/philippines0409webwcover_0.pdf

[7] <http://www.rappler.com/nation/148333-police-hit-squad-drugs>