

Statement

Philippines: Young farmer killed in Bataan over agrarian land

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Christopher Vilete was an active member of the peasant group Samahang Nagkakaisang Magsasaka ng Barangay Sumalo (SANAMABASU) has led the struggle for land rights in a 214 hectare property claimed by the Riverforest Development Corporation, a property developer owned by the Litton Family.

Press Release/Statement

10 JUNE 2019

Hermosa, Bataan – Tensions broke out in Barangay Sumalo after farmers protested a checkpoint illegally installed by private guards of Riverforest Development Corporation which led to a violent confrontation that took the life of one and injured two others.

The deadly violence erupted last June 08, 2019. Christopher Vilete (26) and Elmer Bautista Jr. (22) were caught up in a heated altercation with Riverforest’s guards after the two questioned the legality of the said checkpoints that prohibited residents from bringing farming or building materials in to the Barangay. A guard allegedly threatened Vilete and Bautista Jr. with a balisong (butterfly knife) which prompted the two to report the incident to Elmer Bautista Sr. (54), a Barangay Kagawad.

Bautista Sr. rushed to the scene and confronted the guards about the threats his son and nephew received. Shortly thereafter, Titanic Mystica (60), Riverforest’s “communication officer” and known supporter of the company arrived, firing several warning shots from his .9mm pistol before facing an angered Bautista Sr. with more threats and provocation.

According to witness accounts, violence erupted when Mystica allegedly pointed his gun at the direction of Bautista Sr. and the two young men while threatening to pull the trigger. This prompted Bautista Sr., to step into the line of fire to protect his son and nephew. Mystica however, allegedly fired at Bautista Sr., hitting him in the chest. In an attempt to defend themselves, Vilete and Bautista Jr. grappled with some guards, while Mystica kept firing at onlookers who rushed to aid Bautista Sr. Witnesses also say that Vilete was knifed in the chest by the guard who threatened him earlier.

Seeing Bautista Sr. being beaten and dragged to a nearby security outpost, Vilete, Bautista Jr. and

several young men attempted to take Baustista Sr. to safety, going toe-to-toe with several guards while Mystica allegedly fired more shots at them. Bautista Jr. was hit by a bullet in his foot and was maimed. Amidst the confusion, Vilete and several others managed to reach Bautista Sr.'s side. Witnesses say that Mystica, now pointing his gun at Bautista Sr.'s head pulled the trigger and missed. Instead, the bullet hit Vilete in the face.

Bleeding and coughing blood, Vilete cried for help before collapsing to the ground. Angered by what they saw, both farmers and residents rushed to subdue Mystica, who already ran out of bullets. Barangay Captain Rolando Martinez along with the village peace keeping corps arrived after the shootings, and put Mystica into their custody for a later turnover to local police forces. The three farmers including Mystica were then rushed to the hospital, with Vilete pronounced dead upon arrival.

Vilete was raised by a farming family in Sumalo and was active in a group of young community defenders who stood up against various forms of harassments from Riverforest's private security. In 2017, he led his peers during Sumalo's 100-kilometer march from Bataan to Quezon City and joined the 2-month camp-out protest at the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) Central Office. Vilete worked as photocopier machine operator in the nearby Hermosa Ecozone and Industrial Park and was supposed to leave the country for Taiwan as an Overseas Filipino Worker before the end of June.

For more than two decades, the Samahang Nagkakaisang Magsasaka ng Barangay Sumalo (SANAMABASU) has led the struggle for land rights in a 214 hectare property claimed by the Riverforest Development Corporation, a property developer owned by the Litton Family. In 2006, the Supreme Court decided in favor of Riverforest, ending Sumalo's decade-long legal struggle against a petition to convert their farmlands to commercial/industrial use. In 2011, the conversion order issued by the Department of Agrarian Reform to Riverforest lapsed after the company failed to introduce substantial development in the disputed property, enabling the farmers to file for Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) coverage. Since then, Riverforest has intensified the presence of armed security personnel in the area, installed enclosures that prevented farmers from freely tending to their crops, and filed criminal cases against persons who actively resisted various forms of harassments from the said armed guards.

In January this year, the Office of the President (OP) released a 17-page decision revoking Riverforests' petition for land conversion and ordered the DAR to initiate the process of coverage and distribution. Riverforest again stalled the process by refusing entry of DAR personnel set to conduct ocular inspections and surveys in enclosed land parcels in the disputed area.

Jaime Tadeo of Paragos Pilipinas, a national farmer's organization supporting SANAMABASU, says that the Vilete's death reflects the terrible realities in the countryside, where farmers' rights are constantly trampled by those with enough power to assert better claims over lands. The prevalence of harassments and killings of farmers despite thirty-one years of CARP according to Tadeo, illustrates the lack of government intervention to protect tillers entrenched in agrarian conflict as well as the DAR's weakness in promoting redistributive reform against strong land-owner resistance.

Trinidad Domingo of the Pambansang Koalisyon ng Kababaihan sa Kanayunan (PKKK) explains that protracted land-struggles and the slow-paced process of coverage and distribution leads to the erosion of farmer's rights as it empowers landlords or corporations to operate with impunity—in their attempt to dissolve the claims of actual tillers over the land. Domingo adds that some local DAR officials are known to broker backdoor land deals and have colluded with landlords and corporations to stall the progression of agrarian cases or halt the actual distribution of lands to potential beneficiaries.

Fe Andulan, a farmer leader of SANAMABASU laments that Christopher's death could have been prevented had DAR been quick enough in its effort to uphold the OP decision. "Though we are aware of the legal-technicalities involved before actual distribution of lands can take place, each passing day without any resolution to our case creates more tension between the community and Riverforests guards who continue to harass and intimidate us," Andulan adds. "We pray for peace in our community as we are frightened for the safety of our loved ones. But as we mourn our loss, we also vow to continue the struggle for land and justice."

The Save Agrarian Reform Alliance strongly condemns the killing of Christopher Vilete as well as the hundreds of tillers who lost their lives in the fight for social justice through agrarian reform.

In line with President Rodrigo Duterte's mandate to finish Land Acquisition and Distribution backlogs by 2022, we challenge the DAR to hasten the resolution of agrarian cases and as well as the process of coverage and distribution, especially in areas where the safety and well being of farmers are constantly under threat.

We are also compelling the DAR as well as other agencies involved in the implementation of CARP to prioritize the distribution of Private Agricultural Lands, particularly those under Compulsory Acquisition as it embodies the ideal of the program to dismantle the monopolies of oligarchs and corporations over land.

In light of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and other People working in Rural Areas, we call on government to come up with stronger measures to protect farmers in agrarian conflicts from harassments and violence as well as to establish safeguards that protect potential and existing beneficiaries from land-grabbing, title cancellation, land conversions and other forms of reversals,

Let this not be another case of serious human rights violations where the violated are the ones being prosecuted. This case is a test to the capacity of this government to bring justice to farmers against the impunity of a corporation and its abusive agents on the ground, in this case the armed guards, whose main task is to defy the law and resist agrarian reform.

SARA also enjoins other sectors and social movements to also push for the effective implementation of agrarian reform as it is not only a farmers' issue, but is closely tied to the future of the country's food security. We must again look into the deep seated issues plaguing our countryside and work towards protecting and uplifting the hands that feed our nation.

Focus on the Global South

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• Jun 10, 2019:

<https://focusweb.org/young-farmer-killed-in-bataan-over-agrarian-land/>