

Gun Violence in the Philippines: A Human Security Concern

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Abstract

Death by guns is a big problem in the Philippines. From January to May this year, more than a hundred Filipinos were killed from election-related violence alone. In the year 2002, the Vera Institute of Justice reported that 6,500 Filipinos died from gun violence. In March to April this year, the Philippine Action Network on Small Arms (PhilANSA) conducted focused group discussions (FGD) in various parts of the country to determine, among others, the causes and effects of gun violence in communities. Participants shared that gun violence has implications to their economic life. They cited loss of employment or livelihood, loss of access to food supply, loss of opportunities for investments, destruction of property, and reduced income from tourism as major economic consequences. Others pointed to social costs like displacement, disruption to education as well as disruption of access to medical and health services. Gun violence in the country has created trauma among its victims and fear and insecurity among the citizens. Clearly, it is not only the people's physical security that is threatened by the uncontrolled flow of arms, but their overall human security.

This paper will outline the factors FGD participants have identified as causes and effects of the pervasiveness of arms proliferation and gun violence in the country and the measures they recommended to reduce direct violence- measures that will help promote peoples' security.

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More than 40, 000 people, both combatants and civilians, have died since the war between the government and Communist Party of the Philippines commenced in 1969.¹ Reports from several journalists and human groups indicated that there were at least 244 killings of activists identified with the left since President Gloria Arroyo took office in January 2001.² From January to May this year, 122 Filipinos were killed from election-related violence.³ From the Year 2000 to August 2005, 22 journalists were slain.⁴ And in the first quarter of this year, 2, 159 Filipinos were victims of murder and homicide.⁵ Most of these killings were carried out with the aid of a gun.

Death by guns is a big problem in the Philippines. In the year 2002, the Vera Institute of Justice reported that 6,500 Filipinos died from gun violence.

Pamintuan⁶ posited that the country has a deeply entrenched gun culture. This culture, according to her, can be attributed to three factors. The first is the need to feel some kind of power, a “macho” feeling, which comes from the barrel of a gun. The second is the need for protection brought about by the thought that the gun is the most convenient tool which could protect people from lawless elements that proliferate in many areas of the country. The third is to

¹ “Armed Conflicts Report: Philippines-CPP/NPA”, January 2007, Ploughshares website, www.ploughshares.ca

² “Philippines: Political Killings, Human Rights and the Peace Process”, August 15, 2006, Amnesty International website, <http://web.amnesty.org>

³ Philippine National Police, presentation done during meeting with PhilANSA, Quezon City, June 21, 2007.

⁴ Abi Wright, “On the Radio, Under the Gun: Behind the Rising Death Toll of Radio Broadcasters in the Philippines” August 15, 2005, CPJ website, <http://www.cpj.org>

⁵ “Crime Statistics by Region”, May 2006, Philippine Institute for Development Studies website, <http://www.pids.gov.ph>

⁶ Ana Marie Pamintuan, “Gun Culture”, *The Philippine Star*, April 2, 2007, p. 10.

assume the responsibility of taking the law into their hands to purge enemies because of a flawed justice system often observed to be too slow in grinding the wheel of justice or biased in favor of the economically and politically connected.

Authorities, on the other hand, point to the proliferation of guns to explain soaring rates of violent crime. There are more than 800,000 licensed firearms and another 500,000 loose guns, according to a report from the Philippine Daily Inquirer.⁷ Eighty-seven percent of seized crime guns are unlicensed⁸ and 78% of murders are done using small arms.⁹ The proliferation of guns in the Philippines is evident in signs posted in entrances of private and public institutions requesting people to deposit their firearms before entry.

Clearly, the proliferation of small arms in the Philippines and the magnitude of violence it brings is a human security concern. UNDP's definition of human security includes "freedom from fear" which includes the safety of individuals and groups from "sudden and hurtful disruptions in patterns of daily life".¹⁰ Personal security is one of the identified core elements of human security.

The issue of gun violence has always been relegated to the realm of personal security. But a closer examination of the causes and effects of gun violence in the Philippines indicate that the issue encompasses, as well, other identified core elements of human security such as economic, food, community and political security.

⁷ Alcuin Papa, "Gun Dealers Oppose Amnesty for Loose Firearms", Inquirer.net, <http://news/info.inquirer.net>, Sept. 10, 2007.

⁸ Luigi Del Puerto, "PNP Claims Gains in Drive vs. Loose Firearms", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 19, 2005.

⁹ Marco Garrido, "Philippines: Crazy about Guns", *Asia Times Online*, Jan. 23, 2003.

¹⁰ Richard Jolly & Deepayan Basu Ray, "National Human Development Reports and the Human Security Framework: A Review of Analysis and Experience", Produced for the Human Development Report Office, UNDP, New York, USA, April 2006.

The Philippine Action Network on Small Arms (PhilANSA) conducted a series of Peoples' Consultation (PC) to determine, among other things, the causes and effects of gun violence in the country. The Peoples' Consultation aimed to collect views of ordinary people affected by armed violence. This project was initiated by the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), OXFAM and Amnesty International and was held in more than 50 countries around the world. PhilANSA conducted focused group discussions (FGD) in the following areas in the Philippines: Bacolod and Dumaguete, both in the Visayas region; Zamboanga and Cotabato both in the Mindanao region; the Cordillera Autonomous Region with representatives from Regions 1 and 2 and Metro Manila, all in Luzon. PhilANSA also administered a survey to 487 respondents, within the age bracket of 17 to 75 in Zamboanga, Dumaguete, Bacolod, Aklan, Cotabato, Midsayap, the Cordilleras, and the National Capital Region.

Causes of Gun Violence in the Philippines

Both FGD and survey results indicated that sources of gun violence in the Philippines are by and large *politically- motivated, criminality-related and group conflict-driven*¹¹. *Economics* and *easy access to guns* have also been largely identified as causes of gun violence.

Death by politics is largely caused by political rivalries and ideological conflicts. Numerous lives in the country have been felled by bullets because of political rivalries. The 21-year regime of Former President Ferdinand Marcos allowed the perpetuation in power of local government officials throughout the country who, through the years, have established resilient and powerful political dynasties. Many of these political dynasties have hired private armies or

¹¹ Report of PhilANSA to IANSA on the "Peoples' Consultations in the Philippines on the Arms Trade Treaty", April, 2007.

bodyguards who have helped seal their place in the political echelon. Lives of both challengers to and members of these dynasties have been lost to politically-stained bullets, election time or not. Elections of 2007 saw the death of 122 candidates and supporters while elections of 2004 claimed 189 lives¹².

Innumerable bullets have also been fired for ideological reasons. The 38-year old conflict between the government and the Communist Party of the Philippines and the armed conflict between the government and rebel forces in Mindanao such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front have claimed thousands of lives. More than 200 lives of people affiliated with the extreme left have also been snuffed out since Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed power in 2001. The government claims that such is the work of people from the Left - a strategy to purge its own ranks of unwanted elements. Ferrer, on the other hand, posited that these killings appear to be in line with the slant of the national security policy that the Macapagal-Arroyo administration has adopted since 2002.¹³

Arms are a key factor in facilitating these politically-related killings. The proliferation and use of guns make possible the perpetuation of people in political power depriving others the chance to be elected in public office. It also facilitates ending long-holding political dynasties such as in the case of the Espinosas in Masbate.

... in Masbate, the Espinosas ... are a power to reckon with, bullet for bullet, gun for gun, goon for goon... Espinosa's clan has been seriously decimated in past elections—by violence...political opponents gunned down Rep. Moises Espinosa at the Masbate airport in 1989, seconds after he had stepped off a plane from Manila. Six years later, Rep. Tito Espinosa was murdered near the Batasang Pambansa complex

¹² Philippine National Police, presentation done during meeting with PhilANSA, Quezon City, June 21, 2007.

¹³ Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, Manifestations of Sulong CARHRIHL on the Supreme Court's Summit on Political Killings, The Manila Hotel, July 16-17, 2007.

in suburban Quezon City. In 2001, Moises Espinosa Jr. was murdered while attending a fiesta. He was mayor for only 40 days. ..Espinosa had been eliminated from politics through the power of the bullet, not the ballot...¹⁴

Guns help sustain armed conflicts and make more widespread the violation of human rights. They facilitate the curtailment of the freedom to expression and association. They are tools, and effective at that, in threatening the country's political security.

Participants to the PC also reported that guns are used in their communities to execute crimes such as robbery, hold-up, kidnapping, land grabbing, car-napping, and rape, among others. Several participants to the PC reported that drugs and alcohol had influence in the commitment of many of these crimes.

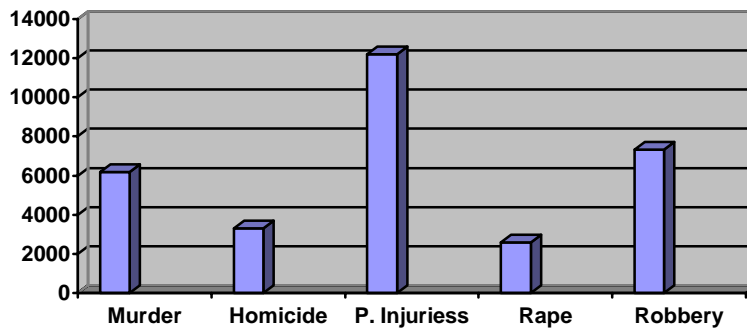
The contention that gun violence is almost always criminally-related is supported by crime statistics provided by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS). For the first quarter of 2007 alone, there were 1, 436 counts of murder; 723 cases of homicide; 2,855 counts of physical injury; 1845 incidents of robbery; and 775 cases of rape.¹⁵

The crime figures from PIDS for 2006 indicate the gravity of this concern¹⁶:

¹⁴ Tony Lopez, "On Maloli and Masbate Politics", The Manila Times, February 2, 2007.

¹⁵ "Crime Statistics by Region", May 2006, Philippine Institute for Development Studies website, <http://www.pids.gov.ph>

¹⁶*ibid.*



Murder and homicide figures indicated above were fully consummated. Frustrated attempts of murder and homicide fell under the category of physical injuries. Robbery cases include only those which involved harm and violence to victims.

Daily reports in television and newspapers indicate that crimes committed in the country are aided by guns. The Philippine National Police acknowledges that firearms are behind most crimes. Del Puerto wrote that 87% of firearms used in crimes from 1993 to 2004 were unlicensed though a sizeable part of it had registration papers.¹⁷

Participants to the PC also pointed to *conflicts involving groups* as sources of gun violence. Gang or fraternity conflicts and family or clan conflicts create patterns of revenge among its members. A key informant from Kalinga confided that almost every household in the province owns a gun because of clan conflicts. Columnist Rina Jimenez-David of the Philippine Daily Inquirer wrote that:

Clan ... conflicts have periodically rocked the otherwise peaceful Kalinga society. The tradition requires that if a member of one clan is killed or otherwise violated, his or her death or violation should be avenged. To avert a bloodbath, conflicts are settled at the “bodong” or village council level. But the

¹⁷ Luigi Del Puerto, “PNP Claims Gains in Drive vs. Loose Firearms”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, May 19, 2005.

proliferation of guns wielded by brash, unthinking young men has caused the phenomenon to spiral madly, way beyond the control of the village elders or of traditional means of mediation.¹⁸

Clan conflicts are a prominent issue in the Cordilleras. However, Bridget Pawid, a participant in the PC, argued that there are no tribal wars that are supported by tribal leaders, but isolated conflicts among members of different indigenous peoples' groups that create patterns of revenge, pointing out that the indigenous communities have always maintained cordial and peaceful co-existence. Therefore, a disturbance of the harmony – i.e. conflict among members of different communities - easily becomes a concern to all.¹⁹

Clan conflicts are also a concern in war-torn Mindanao. Jamail Kamlian of the Mindanao State University wrote that clan conflicts or *rido* are caused by disputes over property; political rivalry; and violation of the family or clan's honor or dignity. Such conflicts if not resolved are passed on to the generations that follow.²⁰ These disputes involving affluent families are typically violent. Thousands of lives have already been claimed in history, as a result; hence, arms are continually procured to update a family's armory.

Dispute over resources was also pointed to by the FGD participants as a source of gun violence. Land disputes are a common concern in the Philippines where genuine land reform is still a vision. In PhilANSA's FGDs in the Visayas, for example, participants reported that peasants' who have claimed ownership to *hacienda* lands placed under the agrarian reform program have been harassed; physically and psychologically attacked; forcibly evicted from their

¹⁸ Rina Jimenez-David, "A Killing in Context", Inquirer.net, <http://opinion.inquirer.net>, May 11, 2007.

¹⁹ Report of PhilANSA to IANSA on the "Peoples' Consultations in the Philippines on the Arms Trade Treaty", April, 2007

²⁰ Jamail Kamlian, "Incidences of Clan Conflict and Conflict Management: Survey of Feuding Families and Clans in Selected Provinces of Mindanao", Research supported by the Asia Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development, June 2005.

homes; and arrested and incarcerated as a consequence of the criminal cases filed by former landowners. (Haciendas are huge tracts of land whose owners sometimes resist the agrarian reform program's goal of land redistribution even with promised government compensation). Their harassment and more recently, the gunning down of some of their kind, even if they have a rightful claim to their lands prompted even the Department of Agrarian Reform to condemn the spate of killings:

The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) condemned the reported spate of killings of farmer leaders in various parts of the country, the most recent of which was the murder of Enrico Cabanit, secretary-general of the Ugnayan ng Nagsasariling Lokal na Organisasyon sa Kanayunan (UNORKA) in Panabo, Davao del Norte. In a statement, the agency said that it is saddened by the merciless killings of the peasant leaders including Task Force Mapalad (TFM) leader Rico Aldeva and Pambansang Katipunan ng Makabayang Magbubukid (PKMM) chairman Porferio Maglasang, both killed by unknown assassins in Negros Occidental. Another farmer organizer Deogracias Erac was also killed last March 23 in Negros Oriental.²¹

PC Participants also shared that in the Mindanao region, gun ownership is the primary security measure used by cattle farmers against aggressors. To prevent theft or outright confiscation of their cattle, farmers said they need to arm themselves with weapons that are equal in strength if not greater to deter would-be assailants. According to farmers, if their arms are inferior and substandard, they do not stand a chance against cattle-stealing syndicates. Owning guns, therefore, is a deterrence strategy against any attacks on their community and livelihood.²²

Both participants to the PC FGD and survey reported that a major cause of violence in their areas is the easy access to guns. Participants reported that illegal arms are used to carry out ambush or liquidation/assassination / political killings, attack on government and private installations, harassment, community control, and illegal activities such as illegal logging, illegal

²¹ "DAR Condemns Killing of Farmer Leaders", Philippine Information Agency website, www.pia.gov.ph, April 28, 2006.

²² Report of PhilANSA to IANSA on the "Peoples' Consultations in the Philippines on the Arms Trade Treaty", April, 2007

fishing and piracy, illegal mining, and gun-running. Participants also claimed that not only *illegal* but also *legal guns* are used to harass and threaten civilians. The use of military and police by landlords to harass civilians and the abuses of personnel in uniform were mentioned by a score of participants.²³

Such claim by PC participants is supported by data from the Philippine National Police. The latter, for instance, reported that during the first quarter of 2006, a total of 1,477 reported crime incidents involved the use of 1,893 loose firearms.²⁴

Where do all these illegal guns come from? Garrido and Amnesty International pointed to three major sources: local manufacture, smuggling and diversion from government sources.²⁵ Arms have been manufactured in the Visayas for decades, most of them unlicensed. Since locally produced, hand guns or revolvers may be had for a song, sometimes, as low as US \$15. Guns are reportedly smuggled from China, Libya, Malaysia, and Afghanistan, most of them usually through backdoor channels in the South, supplying both armed political and criminal groups.²⁶ The government arsenal had also been identified as a source of loose firearms whether through loss, theft, or illegal sale.²⁷

Guns and Human Security

PhilANSA found out in its Peoples' Consultations around the country that arms proliferation and gun violence have a direct effect on the human security concerns of the people. Guns claim thousands of lives annually with a score more getting wounded or injured. Gun

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Philippine Police Prioritizes Campaign against Loose Firearms", Government of the Philippines website, <http://www.gov.ph/news>, May 18, 2005.

²⁵ ²⁵ Marco Garrido, "Philippines: Crazy about Guns", *Asia Times Online*, Jan. 23, 2003.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

violence inflicts trauma and fear principally on children, and particularly in Mindanao where there is an ongoing armed conflict between the government and the MILF and Abu Sayyaf. Guns enable crimes and increase crime incidence rates such as hold-ups, kidnappings, robbery, rape and carnappings throughout the archipelago. Guns enable, sustain and intensify armed conflicts that forcibly displace people from their homes disrupting as well food production and other forms of livelihood; children's schooling; and peoples' access to medical services thereby violating their right to economic security. Guns have become tools that violate the rights of people to peacefully assemble, express their opinion, get elected in office, and peacefully claim ownership to resources like land, among others. Guns have become tools to further the injustice committed against the poor to live in peace. Gun violence had cut down opportunities for tourism and development discouraging would be- investors and visitors. Gun violence intensifies further the gaps between groups that are hostile to each other (e.g. some Muslim and Christian communities). In sum, guns have become tools to perpetuate a cycle of violence, both direct and structural, promoting insecurity among the populace.

Conclusion

Proliferation of small arms and the violence that goes with it creates fear and deprivation which are threats to the promotion of human security. Participants to the FGDs and survey conducted by PhilANSA recognized that the armed struggle waged by dissident forces are nurtured by injustices experienced in society and that government efforts should attack the root causes of dissidence and focus on programs that will bring development and well-being to all- or armed conflict would not cease. Gun violence has derailed the peace processes several times in

the past. Participants to the FGD called on armed groups to go back to the negotiating tables and collaboratively find ways to address the persistence of inequities that cause insecurities.

The promotion of peaceful conflict resolution methods and skills, which indigenous communities throughout the country are cognizant of, should be actively utilized considering that group conflicts and political rivalries are essential concerns. Rather than taking the law into their own hands which many groups are wont to do, there should be efforts from both government and civil society groups to create more spaces or zones of peace in communities and encourage the practice of peaceful conflict resolution skills.

Notably, FGD participants also agreed that one pathway to security is the creation and implementation of programs that would stop the flow of arms especially to groups or individuals that commit crimes and human rights violations. They have recognized that the proliferation of small arms have caused untold suffering. Positive peace could not prosper if there is direct violence. To create a climate of peace and security, the tools of direct violence, like guns should be controlled. Peace talks and development efforts would not prosper if the echoes of gun shots continue to pound in peoples' ears.

Guns in the wrong hands have had deleterious effects on the personal, economic and political security of the Filipino people. Giving the issue a serious look could just be an effective pathway to the protection of their lives and the promotion of their over-all security.

