

Torture and disappearances in the Philippines

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Military in Samar Abducted, Tortured Three Organizers, One Luckily Escaped

Tragic stories of torture and disappearances continue to happen in remote villages. Juliet Fernandez, her husband Manuel Pajarito and a companion were abducted allegedly by soldiers at dawn on May 11, 2007 in Pinabacdao town, Samar island. Jepoy, their companion later escaped from military custody to tell the story. The couple, meanwhile, remain missing.

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Juliet Fernandez, 32, a former campus editor easily bursts into giggles and jokes as she recounts the lives of poor peasants she has known and to whom she has devoted her life to.

Among other things, these are the moments which the family and friends of Juliet sorely miss. They have not seen her since she was abducted last May 11, 2007 along with her husband Manuel Pajarito and a companion only known as Jepoy, in a remote area in Sitio Caman-ilao, Barangay, Nabong, Pinabacdao, Samar.

Juliet is the eldest of three siblings from a working class family residing in Mandaluyong City. She was a sociology student at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) from 1992 to 1996 where she also wrote and edited for the campus paper, The Catalyst. She was an active member of the College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP).

Juliet later joined the GABRIELA-Youth and was elected the organization's secretary general in 1997. As a GABRIELA-Youth leader, she often volunteered to join fact finding missions on cases of human rights violations. She also joined her organization's Basic Masses Integration Program in a peasant community of Amiham (National Federation of Women) in Naic, Cavite.

Her passion for helping the peasantry was kindled, all the more so because of her own family's peasant roots. In 2002, after her stint in the rural communities in Cavite, she went to do research and later full-time organizing among the peasants in Eastern Visayas where

her mother hails.

Abducted and tortured

KARAPATAN-Eastern Visayas (KARAPATAN-EV) reported that Juliet, Manuel and Jepoy were on board a van travelling along the Maharlika at dawn on May 11 when soldiers belonging to the army's 62nd IB under Lt. Col. Jonathan Ponce blocked their way and forcibly took them blindfolded to a military detachment in Barangay Botoc, Pinabacdao.

The three were later transferred to the 62nd IB's camp in Barangay Polangi, Calbiga where they were detained in separate but adjacent quarters, interrogated and tortured. Juliet was allegedly raped, according to KARAPATAN-EV.

But on May 19, after eight days of being tortured Jepoy was able to escape from the military camp. Jepoy recounted to KARAPATAN-EV that he was tortured with his hands tied and hung and deprived of food and water. Jepoy was the main source of information in the investigation of the incident.

Fact finding mission

In response to requests of Juliet's and Manuel's family to investigate the abduction and to locate their whereabouts, KARAPATAN and GABRIELA conducted a fact finding mission on June 20 participated in by the Commission on Human Rights-Samar representative Sami Malinao, and representatives from the academe, medical profession and media, as well as the victims' relatives.

The mission went to two military camps and two police stations in search of the victims. At the 62nd IB's headquarters in Barangay Polangi, Calbiga town, a certain Lt. Ayroso said he was not authorized to give information regarding Juliet and Manuel and that he could not issue a certification stating that they were not being held at the camp's premises.

At the Calbiga police station, Deputy Chief Danilo Baldicano Getigan told the mission they had no record of the incident and suggested that the team check with the PNP station in Barangay Pinabacdao where the incident occurred. The team proceeded to the station in Pinabacdao where the team was also told they have no record of the incident.

The mission also went to Camp Major Eugenio Daza, headquarters of the 801st IB in Fatima, Hinabangan, Samar, where they were told by Major Armand Rico, 801st IB civil military operations officer that he has no knowledge of the incident but declined a request to issue a certification that the victims were not detained at the camp.

Witnesses

The mission also went to the area where the abduction took place to gather testimony from witnesses. The witnesses' identities were withheld to protect them from possible harm.

A woman resident confirmed that such an incident occurred on May 11. She said the victims were first brought to a camp in Brgy. Botoc and were then transferred to the 62nd IB camp in Barangay Botoc, Pinabacdao.

She also said she knew one of them was able to escape. She told the mission that the victims were tortured and that Juliet was raped while her husband was forced to watch the atrocity handcuffed. She said the abduction occurred along Maharlika Highway in Sitio Caman-ilao, Barangay, Nabong, Pinabacdao.

The team then proceeded to Sitio Caman-ilao and interviewed some residents, who confirmed that Juliet and Manuel were indeed abducted by the military on that date.

One couple reported that Juliet and Manuel stayed in their house before proceeding to the highway where they were abducted at around 3:00 a.m. Later during the morning, elements of the 62nd IB came to their house and demanded that they explain why they allowed Juliet and Manuel to stay in their house and why they fed them. The soldiers also alleged that Juliet and Manuel were members of the New Peoples' Army, the witnesses said.

In the morning of 20 May 2007, the same group of military men visited their house looking for "Jepoy," whom the soldiers said was able to escape from detention. The couple denied having seen Jepoy.

Sometime during the second week of June, the children of a resident of Sitio Caman-ilao who knew Juliet and Manuel told their parents they saw the victims on board a pick-up vehicle in the company of soldiers. The children identified the vehicle as owned by the military.

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