

Right-wing Vigilantes, Human Rights Violations and LIC Strategy Under the Aquino Government *

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INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, the Third World, according to Prof. Randolph David, is characterized by imperialist domination and subjugation, militarization and gross violations of basic human rights.¹ Going a step further, he asserted that most discussions on these three problems tend to treat each one in isolation from one another. He said for example that when people speak of imperialism, the facilitating role of domestic ruling classes and the internal structures of dominance like the local State are systematically ignored. Similarly, militarization and concomitant violations of human rights are at times treated as purely domestic affairs, with no connection whatsoever with imperialist control.

The "rich" legacy left behind by what has been popularly called the "US-Marcos dictatorship" has afforded us the chance to see the interrelations of imperialism, a fascist military dictatorship and violations of fundamental political, civil, social, cultural and economic rights.

The 14-long years of martial rule opened wide the floodgates for imperialist control and plunder of Philippine society. This is most telling in the economic sphere where the human and natural resources of the country were exploited to the hilt in terms of unilateral investments, preposterous loans, unequal trade and other instrumentalities which only favored American capital. After the dictator left, or was shanghaied to Hawaii as Mr. Marcos would like us to believe, the treasury was penniless. Foreign debt stood at \$28 billion. The economy was at a standstill.

Throughout the 14 long years of Marcosian rule, the foundation of fascist repression and terror was systematically laid, extended and strengthened. Civilian authority and control over the military were reversed. The military became the supreme authority from the national, regional, provincial, municipal down to the barangay level.

Documents from Task Force Detainees Philippines, Amnesty International, International Commission of Jurists

reveal the extent of human rights violations perpetrated during the long dark years of the US-Marcos dictatorship. To refresh our minds, let us recall some of the statistics.

Upon the declaration of martial law on September 21, 1972 and a few months thereafter, Mr. Marcos arbitrarily arrested and illegally detained 30,000 people. Before martial law was "officially lifted" on January 17, 1981, an additional 40,000 were committed to the various detention centers nationwide, a great majority under the dreaded Arrest, Search and Seizure Order (ASSO), the Presidential Commitment Order (PCO) and the Preventive Detention Action (PDA).

Of these tens of thousands arrested and detained without the benefit of fair and impartial trial, a big number, the exact figure is still to be determined, underwent various forms of torture. Water cure known as "Nawasa," electrocution of vital parts including the sex organ termed "Meralco," simultaneous banging of the ears to produce a ringing sound in the head or "PLDT," rape, detention in isolation cell and many more inhuman treatments of detainees were the order of the day.

Documented cases of salvaging or summary execution is conservatively placed at 1,994 or an average of 35.75 persons per month at the end of 1985. Our own *desaparecidos* or those who disappeared involuntarily, like Fr. Rudy Romano, CsSR, stood at the ominous sum of 666. These documented cases of disappearances all point to the military as the culprit.

As for the war of attrition in Mindanao alone, 50,000 innocent civilians including children and mothers were killed. Not included in this figure are the tens of thousands who were driven away from their homes under the holy name of counter-insurgency.

Human Rights Under Aquino

The advent of a new regime is supposed to have changed all that. In fact, there was so much hope and expectation after the kleptomaniac dictatorial tandem and even loyal sychopants were kicked out. But now that the euphoria is dying down, what has the new government accomplished in this triad of problems which has become the hallmark of Third World existence?

In terms of liberating the country from the clutches of imperialist subjugation, the gain is zero. In fact, the economic policy of the Aquino government has even surpassed the previous regime in terms of subservience to the policy dictates of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Just take notice of the import liberalization program or take a good look at the National Patrimony provision of the "overwhelmingly" ratified 1986 Constitution.

In terms of dismantling the fascist structure, the gain is really insignificant even if we consider the sacking of former defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile as a breakthrough. While

the Supreme Court has been revamped and the *Kilusang Bagong Lipunan* (KBL) governors, mayors and barangay captains have been replaced by appointed officers-in-charge (OICs), the military has remained as the real power behind the throne. Simply put, the military has not been re-oriented. To make matters worse, it is now tasked by their commander-in-chief to give her a "string of honorable victories" through an all-out people's war. No wonder then that the boys are once more singing "Happy Days Are Here Again."

In terms of human rights, which the then candidate Cory Aquino promised to uphold and respect if elected to the highest office of the land, the losses far outpoint the gains.

First the positive points.

On March 16, 1986, a few days after assuming office, President Aquino issued Executive Order No. 8 creating the Presidential Committee on Human Rights (PCHR) to investigate cases of human rights violations perpetrated by the military, suggest remedial and punitive actions and propose safeguards to ensure respect for human rights.

Within the same period of time, Mrs. Aquino ordered the release of some 600 political prisoners who have languished in jail notwithstanding the formal lifting of martial rule in 1981.

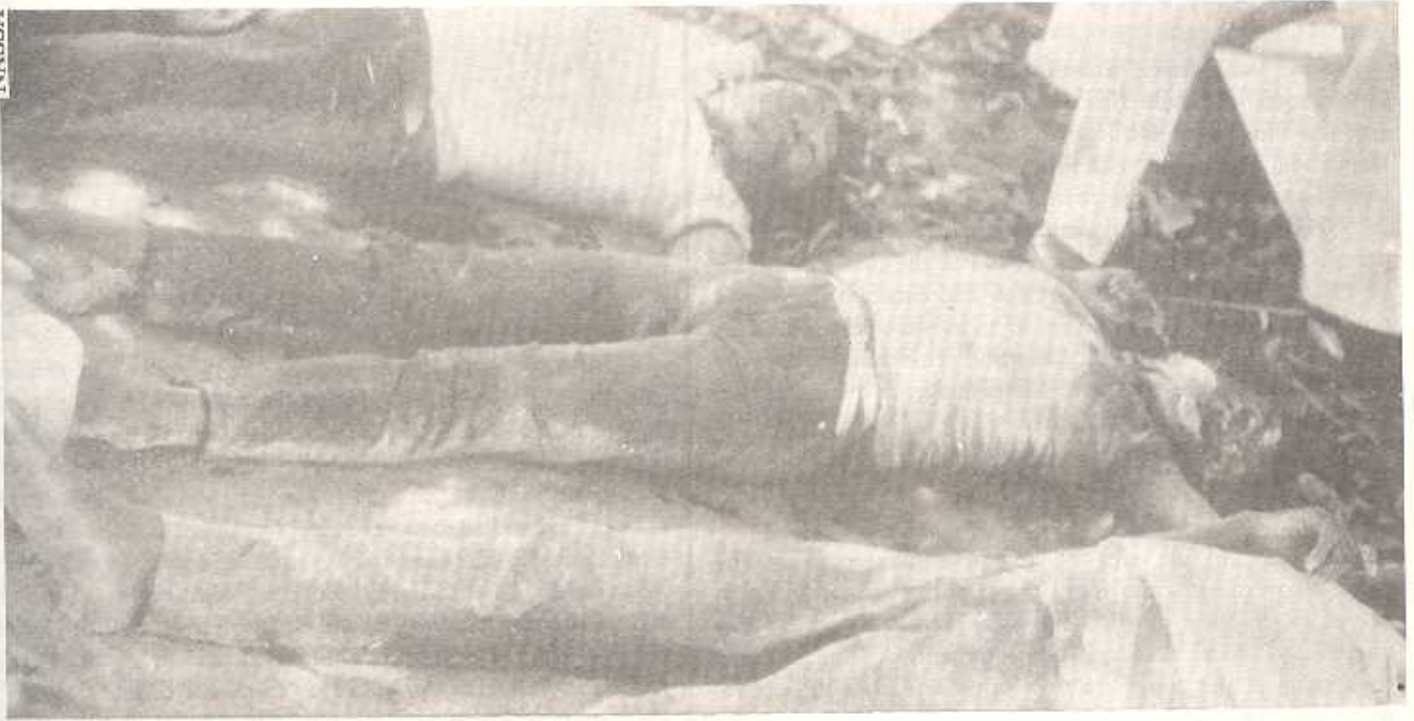
On July 4, 1986, President Aquino issued Executive Order No. 27 to the Department of Education, Culture and Sports and Memorandum Order No. 2 to the Department of National Defense, requiring them to include the study of human rights in the curricula for all levels of schooling including the education and training of all police, military and other arresting and investigating personnel.

President Aquino has also repealed some of the repressive decrees manufactured by the previous regime, like PD 1877 and 1877-A on the preventive detention action; PD 33 on possession of subversive materials; and PD 1404 lengthening the number of hours of detention prior to being charged in court.

The recently ratified 1986 Constitution contains an expanded Bill of Rights which include, among others, provisions that: ban on waiver of right to counsel and to silence, unless executed in writing and in the presence of counsel; prohibit secret detention places, solitary confinement and incommunicado detention; reinforce the right to bail even when the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus* is suspended; and abolish the death penalty.

The Philippine government has likewise ratified a number of international covenants and conventions including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which took effect on January 23, 1987; the Covenant Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (acceded last April 30, 1986) and Protocol II, the additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949 which relates to the protection of civilians caught in the crossfire between government and rebel forces. Protocol II took effect last June, 1987.

Now the negative points.



When the Aquino government was barely seven months in power, it has already to its credit (discredit is the more appropriate term) 88 cases of documented salvaging, for an average of 12.57 cases per month. Also, in this seven-month period, from February 26 to September 30 (1986), there were 36 reported incidents of massacre where 138 persons were killed, 45 were wounded, and 22 incidents of frustrated massacre occurred, while 10 attempted massacres were reported. As for disappearances, 43 cases were reported of which 32 instances were pointed to the military as perpetrators.

As for arrest and detention, 603 people were arrested during this period. Of this figure, 30 were salvaged while in military custody, 33 disappeared and 7 escaped.

In terms of mass evacuation, some 20,000 families from six regions were displaced during the first seven months of the Cory government. In Cagayan Valley alone, there were 11 cases of mass evacuation just for the month of February.

For the first half of 1987, the human rights situation does not look too promising at all.

Based on partial and preliminary data of the Task Force Detainees-Philippines, from January to June this year, some 902 persons were arbitrarily arrested of whom 351 were tortured or 39% of the total. There were 57 cases of disappearances, 67 cases of salvaging and 12 cases of frustrated salvaging.²

But what caught people in disbelief were the massacres and frustrated massacre which took place during this period. There were 18 massacres and frustrated massacres where 62 persons were killed, 168 were wounded and 8,034 escaped unharmed.

Still fresh in the mind of the public is the heinous

and dastardly killing by police and military elements of 17 peasant rallyists in front of the historic Mendiola bridge last January 22.

Five days after that, PC soldiers opened fire at Bataan Export Processing Zone (BEPZ) workers marching from the zone to the Mariveles town proper to protest the very incident at Mendiola. After the gunfire subsided, two people lay dead. One was a young engineering graduate who was a member of the League of Filipino Students (LFS). Another was a young boy of 9 who was watching the whole thing on top of a tree. Outside of this, hundreds were injured as they scampered for safety, jumping over the bridge that separates the town proper and the factory zone, diving in the broken bottle-laden field, dodging bullets fired in front and from the mountainous side and getting away from the stampede.

On February 10, 2 days after the ceasefire negotiation between the government and the National Democratic Front (NDF) broke down, composite military elements from the 14th Infantry Battalion swooped down and mercilessly shot to death 17 villagers of Lupao, Nueva Ecija, including a number of children and old people. This was in retaliation for the sniping by the NPA of a fresh PMA graduate, a Lt. Edgar Dizon, who was leading a platoon on patrol.

Outside of these, 318 cases of harassment by military elements were reported. Thirty-six cases of evacuation were documented, while 5 cases of food blockade, including the one in Ilagan, Isabela and the one in Moises Padilla, Negros Oriental were reported to have affected thousands of families. Likewise, 189 illegal divestment of property or looting took place on top of the 12 incidents of destruction of properties. Meanwhile, 20 deaths resulted from military actions like indiscriminate firing and the like.

The trade union situation in 1986, according to the Commission on Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR), saw 26 unionists murdered, 586 strikes were launched throughout the year with 902 workers arrested and 227 injured as most of these were brutally dispersed.³

From February to the end of December 1986, some 908 persons were arrested and detained. For the first six months of 1987, 902 persons were arrested and detained for alleged political offenses. A big portion of them were released. However, at least 323 are still in detention. This number plus the 180 political detainees who were leftovers from the Marcos era give us a total of 502 political prisoners.

Alarming Trends

Overall, in the area of human rights record of the Aquino government, the trend brings shiver to human rights advocates, in spite of the gains that were achieved by this supposedly liberal democratic government. Alarming if not frightening is the trend that we can glean from the above-mentioned statistics.

If we are to make a comparative ratio on several points between the last year of the Marcos rule (1985) with the first eight months of the Aquino regime, we would see the reasons why we should be worried. While there is certainly a big gap between 14 long years of Marcosian rule and the first ten months of this regime with a supposedly liberal democratic facade, it would be interesting to see and compare the two. The former on its descent and therefore on its ebb. The latter, still on its ascent.

Comparing for instance the number who disappeared from the number of arrest for political offenses like subversion and rebellion, we have for 1985 a ratio of 1:24 or 4.16%. Meaning, for every 24 persons arrested during the last year of one-man rule, one disappeared. For 1986, the ratio is 1 is to 14.02 (7.14%) or almost double the figure for 1985. For the first half of 1987, the figure is 1:16, a slight improvement over last year. But as they say, the year is still young.

As for the ratio concerning salvaging versus arrest, for every 13 persons arrested in 1985, one was salvaged. In 1986, this doubled. For every six arrested, one was summarily executed. For the first six months of this year, one was salvaged for every 14 persons arrested.

For the comparative ratio between torture vis-a-vis arrest, it is almost constant at 1:3 for the three time periods in consideration.

In terms of the analysis for massacres, comparing 1986 with the trend for the first quarter of 1987, TFDP saw the following emerging but still tentative pattern: "Massacres though now committed *less in frequency* than over last year's are *carried out in large scale magnitude and over large groups of people*. Last year's statistics reveal that every massacre incident claims on the average four people dead, one wounded



survivor and about one unharmed survivor. This year's massacre, however claims on the average six people dead, two wounded and 1,145 unharmed but direct victims of the incident" (underscoring supplied).⁴

Also, one noticeable trend is the magnitude of evacuations that are now taking place compared to the evacuations that took place during the martial law period. For example, in Davao alone, according to military figures, the number of evacuees during the months following the breakdown of the ceasefire agreement between the government and the National Democratic Front has already reached 23,000 families. So much so that national human rights organizations based in Manila like the Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace (EMJP), TFD and the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) launched a "Food for Davao/ Peace for the Land" campaign to augment the food supply of the refugees.

Two major and interrelated factors are the immediate cause of these massive evacuations.

One is the excessive use of firepower. It has been the practice of this new regime to use *tora-tora* planes, mortar artillery, howitzer cannons, helicopter gunships, the \$25 million dollar a piece Sikorsky helicopters and even chemical bombs (as have been found by a fact-finding mission to Pacu Valley in Kalinga-Apayao). This is of course done and justified under the holy name of counter-insurgency. Or in the gospel according to defense secretary Rafael "Rocky" Ileta, a self-professed American boy: "You must remember that fighting the communists is not a game. It is war. . . (and) we do not hesitate to shoot a communist who refuses to surrender."⁵ The problem of course is that even Ileta cannot define who are the communists and who are not.

Second, and still part of this overall counter-insurgency plan codenamed Operation Plan (Oplan) Mamamayan (Citizenry) is the formation and active utilization of right-wing vigilante groups. In fact, a sizeable number of refugees from Davao and Cebu City refused to return to their homes and farms because of fear for their life as they are continuously being threatened and harassed by these lunatic terrorists.

The Phenomenon of Right-Wing Vigilantes

One of the more well known brand names of right-wing vigilantism is the *Alsa Masa*, the forerunner of them all.

Alsa Masa was founded in early 1984 by former Agdao Barangay Captain Wilfredo "Baby" Aquino (no relation to the President). It perished after the NPA gunned down Aquino in 1985. Revived by Lt. Col. Franco Calida after he replaced

Lt. Col. Jesus Magno as Metrodiscom chief, *Alsa Masa* surfaced after the collapse of the peace talk with the NDF. It is now headed by Rolando "Boy Ponsa" Cagay, a self-proclaimed former NPA sparrow member.

Many of its members were former criminals, according to Calida himself in his internal document on the *Alsa Masa*.⁶ Others were NPA "surrenderees" reported to be former "deep penetration agents" of the military. Its members also include cultist groups which are being armed for counter-insurgency such as the *Tadtad* and the *Pulahanes*. A local radio commentator of DXOW, Jun Porras Pala, serves as its chief spokesman. Pala launches vicious attacks on the air against persons and groups which do not support the *Alsa Masa*, calling them leftists and communists and oftentimes threatening them with bodily harm.

As of the middle of August, 1987, the research and public information desks of PAHRA have recorded a total of 205 major civilian armed groups operating nationwide. Of this total, 127 are outright vigilante formations, while 63 are religious fanatical groups and 15 are armed bandit gangs which serve as a recruitment base for the vigilantes. Of the 127 major formations, 53 can be found in Mindanao, 41 in the Visayas, 27 in Luzon, and at least six groups in Metro Manila.

The existence, proliferation and coddling of right-wing vigilante groups, fanatical groups and armed bandit gangs are an anathema to peace. The most disturbing part is that the United States government, through its two-track policy, has established "ties with right-wing military and vigilante networks to move the Philippine government to the right, or even overthrow it should it return to its center-life roots."⁷ The other half of the track is of course to show public support for the Aquino government.

A U.S.-Philippine Fact-Finding Mission which visited the Philippines last May 20 - 30 and headed by former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark "uncovered what amounts to a *prima facie* case of US involvement, if not in the organization, arming, and training of right-wing vigilante groups, then certainly in the over-all counter-insurgency/low intensity conflict operation of the Philippine government. This was especially significant in the light of President Reagan's approval of an additional \$10 million and a dozen new agents for CIA operations in the Philippines. So, too, are Singlaub's activities in the Philippines, his meetings with rightist government and military officials, and business people urging the organization of anti-communist groups. Moreover, the alleged joint anti-communist propaganda of CAUSA International and USIS suggests a growing involvement in the Aquino government's 'all out war' against the insurgents."⁸

The same fact-finding mission also asserted that "(T)he protection of U.S. economic and strategic interests is a primary factor in the escalation of vigilante violence."⁹ The victims of vigilante violence are mostly poor people like farmers, workers, students, church workers, whose sins, if you can call them that, were to push for genuine land reform,

genuine industrialization, decent wages and better working condition, as well as oppose US intervention and domination.

Vigilante violence first took center stage when *Alsa Masa* members shot to death Federico Fuentes, a farmer, during a BAYAN rally in Davao City last December 10, 1986. Ironically, the rally was in celebration of International Human Rights Day and the first day of the ceasefire agreement between the government and the NDF.

From then on, even while the ceasefire was enforced, the violence and terrorism continued.

Members of cause-oriented groups like the women's coalition GABRIELA were coerced into joining the *Alsa Masa*. Refusal means the painting of a big red "X" in front of the door which could later on lead to strafing of the house and the occupants.

Another well - documented incident involved the killing last March 9, 1987 of a dentistry student, Paul Perdido. He was shot dead inside the comfort room of the Mindanao Aeronautical and Technological School (MATS) by *Alsa Masa* goons who mistook him for a League of Filipino Students (LFS) member that they were hunting.

Still in Davao, in Mandug, last April 28, members of the fanatical group *Tadtad* hacked to death Peter Alderite, aged 31, married with one son and one of the board of directors of the Lapanday Workers' Union (LWU). According to a report of Amnesty International, "(W)hen local military men were told about the killing, they reportedly did nothing, although an official investigation into the killing was later opened. According to a police report filed on 30 April, witnesses to the killing were unwilling to identify themselves out of fear for their own safety. Two of the alleged leaders of the *Tadtad* group were publicly named shortly after the killing, but, to Amnesty International's knowledge, no member of the group has been disarmed or charged with the murder."¹⁰

The killing goes on, the violence continues. But in spite of an earlier PCHR investigation which confirms earlier human rights groups' allegations on the vigilantes, i.e. these are not voluntary and spontaneous peoples' organizations, the members are armed, with no effective control by the proper authorities, and violative of Article 18, section 24 of the 1986 Constitution and Protocol II of the Geneva Convention, the Aquino government simply refused to lift a finger.

At this point, we cannot help but feel betrayed. Peter Berger in *Invitation to Sociology* mentions something about how things have a tendency to revert to the old order. He said: "When the great cataclysm is over and men have settled down to live under what was considered a new order, it invariably turns out that the changes have not been quite as total as it first appeared. Economic interests and political ambitions take over at the point where insurrectionary fervor has begun to cool. The old habits reassert themselves and the order created by the revolution begins to acquire disturbing similarities with the *ancien regime* that it overthrew."¹¹

In the case of the Aquino regime, it was not meant after

all to dramatically and radically restructure Philippine society. Without meaning to downgrade the spirit of EDSA '86, it was at best a unique Filipino way of getting rid of the conjugal dictatorship, not the US-Marcos dictatorship. It was not, unfortunately, a social revolution. Nonetheless, for the planners in the White House, the Pentagon, the US State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the ascendancy of a "popular" but not populist and "sincere" but essentially elitist and conservative president is the best that could have happened under the circumstances.

US Maneuvering through the LIC Strategy

Very much like Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador, the rise to power of Cory Aquino provided the Reagan administration a much bigger maneuvering space to fully secure their economic, political and military interests. That without much prodding from the United States, the Aquino government has unsheathed the "sword of war" and is going all out in the implementation of a counter-insurgency program is already one proof of this. But just to make sure that everything else is really in place, the United States has intensified its implementation of what is now popularly called the low intensity conflict (LIC) strategy.

As defined, LIC is total war in the grassroots level, where the battle is not only limited in the military front, but also in the diplomatic, social, psychological, economic and political spheres. In fact, for LIC exponents, the ideal ratio is 10% military and 90% civilian or 15% military and 85% political.

From its logic of war, a number of things can at once be identified as currently applicable to the phenomenon of right-wing vigilantes and the resulting human rights violations under the Aquino regime.

First is the focus to undermine grassroots support. Just looking at the concentration of their attacks, we can see that the targets are cause-oriented groups who are very vocal and militant in asserting their legitimate demands and interests.

Second is the fact that in LIC, intelligence becomes central. One of the expressed functions of the vigilantes is precisely that—gather information on unfamiliar people entering or leaving a particular community.

Third is the blurring of distinction between civilian and military responsibilities. Calida expressed this better by denying his role on the formation of the *Alsa Masa* on one hand and telling all and sundry that the "*Alsa Masa* is the people." In that way, whatever atrocities are committed, the military can wash its hands, though deep inside they jump with joy because their objectives are attained.

Conclusion

The point of all these, as Ramsey Clark and his group have correctly pinpointed is the fact that "(A)t the root of

vigilante and other violence in the Philippines lie poverty, social injustice, and continued foreign domination of Philippine economic and political life."¹² In short, the Philippines has remained a neo-colony of the United States subject to its whim and manipulation. As such and in radical terms, the basic problems of imperialist domination, bureaucrat corruption and domestic feudal relations remain. A more poetic formulation of these problems was given by the late senator Jose W. Diokno – the cry of the people he said, are "food and freedom, jobs and justice, land and liberation."

It is only by addressing the roots of the problems that we can effectively lessen if not totally eliminate human rights violations and build peace based on justice. Low intensity conflict strategy notwithstanding.

In this ever-pressing quest to defend and advance human rights, it is noteworthy to recall a very appropriate counsel from the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Roberto Concepcion. He said: "Respect for human rights and observance of fundamental freedoms depends, not so much upon constitutions, laws or courts of justice, as upon the people's support of such rights and freedoms, upon their readiness to assume the risk entailed in backing them up and striving for their predominance".¹³ **K**

Notes:

¹ Randolph David, "Imperialism, militarization and human rights in Asia," *KASARINLAN*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1985, p. 3.

² "TFDP Preliminary Statistics on Human Rights Violations (January-June, 1987)", mimeographed, p. 2.

³ *Philippine Trade Union Report*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 1986.

⁴ "TFDP Statistical Report on Human Rights Violations for the First Quarter of 1987," mimeographed, p. 10.

⁵ Ramsey Clark, Gerald Horne, Ralph McGehee, Catherine Pinkerton, Lester Edwin J. Ruiz and Leonard Weinglass, *Report of a U.S. Philippine Fact-Finding Mission to the Philippines*, p. 30.

⁶ Franco M. Calida, "Alsa Masa and its Implications," type-written, p. 1.

⁷ Ramsey Clark, *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁸ Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, *Right-wing Vigilantism and the Betrayal of Democracy*, NCCP-HRD, Quezon City, pp. 4-5.

⁹ Clark, *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, "Philippines: Alleged Human Rights Violations By 'Vigilante groups,'" July 1987 mimeographed, p. 4.

¹¹ Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Anchor Books, New York, 1963, p. 124.

¹² Clark, *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹³ Roberto Concepcion, *The Lawyers Review*, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 15.