

## **Summary of National Fact Finding Report on the Killing of Fr. Cecilio Lucero**

On 6 September 2009, Fr. Cecilio P. Lucero, 48 years old, a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Catarman in Samar, was killed by 4-5 unidentified armed men. While travelling in a Toyota van from the town of Allen to the town of Catubig in Northern Samar, Fr. Lucero together with his police escort Police Officer Eugene Bation and an electrician named Isidro Miras were ambushed by at least five persons armed with high-powered rifles at 8:30 in the morning. Isidro Miras was wounded and still in a state of shock while Police Officer Eugene Bation emerged from the ambush literally unscathed.

Cecilio Lucero was the ninth child and the youngest son among the twelve children of Francisco Lucero and Milagros Pelito both from Northern Samar. He finished his college degree at the Sacred Heart Seminary in Palo, Leyte and then proceeded to the San Carlos Seminary in Cebu for his theological studies. He was ordained priest on 14 September 1987. He then was assigned as administrator of San Roque Parish before becoming parish priest of another parish in the Diocese of Catarman. Two of Fr. Lucero's brothers chose the path of politics. Wilmar Lucero became Northern Samar representative to the Lower House of Congress and Antonio Lucero is the incumbent vice-governor of Northern Samar. Fr. Cecil, as he was fondly called by his parishioners and friends, was known to be a serious and disciplined person, and very vocal with his views. To those who knew him well, he was a man of action and a good friend.

Fr. Lucero was a human rights advocate. He was named chairperson of the Human Rights Desk of the Social Action Center of the diocese by the Most Rev. Emmanuel C. Trance, Bishop of the Diocese of Catarman. He was also a member of the Promotion of Church People's Response (PCPR)-Northern Samar. Months before he was killed, Fr. Lucero had led a series of fact-finding missions on human rights violations involving state security forces in the Municipalities of Lope de Vega, Las Navas, Pambujan and Palapag. Before his death, Fr. Lucero admitted to his colleagues that he had been receiving death threats and had to acquire the services of a police escort.

On 3 September 2009, at around eight in the evening, elements of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army (63<sup>rd</sup> IB-PA) paid Fr. Lucero a visit at his parish in the town of Catubig. According to the testimony of a witness, he saw five men in civilian clothing enter the priest's office. He heard them talking to Fr. Lucero about the killings that had happened in the municipality of Lope de Vega. He heard the men apologizing to Fr. Lucero and told him that it would not happen again. He also testified that outside the office, he saw a six-by-six military truck with about ten people in military uniform who were fully armed.

Government authorities especially the Commanding General of the 8th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army (8<sup>th</sup> ID-PA) issued two conflicting press releases. Immediately after the ambush, the first statement of the Philippine Army blamed the ambush on the New People's Army (NPA). Another statement issued later said that Fr. Lucero was a victim of the bickering of local

politicians. The Philippine National Police (PNP) Region 8 organized the Task Force Lucero, a body tasked to investigate the killing but has yet to release an official report of its investigation.

A National Fact-Finding Mission (NFFM) for Fr. Lucero was conducted on 7-10 October 2009 headed by Karapatan (Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights) and PCPR in cooperation with the Diocese of Catarman. The fact-finding mission aimed to uncover the truth behind the killing of Fr. Lucero through the conduct of a thorough investigation in order to determine who the perpetrators were and the motives behind the incident. The fact-finding mission also would look into other cases of human rights violations in Northern Samar.

Two days before the arrival of the fact-finding team in Catarman, Ruth Gecaro, who was on her way to fetch witnesses and victims for the National Fact Finding Mission, was forcibly taken and forced into a vehicle by elements believed to be soldiers from the 63<sup>rd</sup> IB-PA. As of this time, Gecaro's whereabouts are still unknown.

Documents from an intelligence report believed to be made by the Philippine Army were furnished the NFFM during the conduct of the investigation. In the report, names of personalities of progressive and party-list organizations in Northern Samar were listed in the Order of Battle (OB) of the Philippine Army; Fr. Lucero's name was on the list.

#### Conclusions reached by the National Fact-Finding Mission

1. The brutal killing of Fr. Cecilio Lucero is part of the government's counter-insurgency program, *Oplan Bantay Laya*, which targets to neutralize perceived enemies of the state. Fr. Lucero's killing shows the patterns attendant to the many cases of extrajudicial killings in the country. His name being mentioned in the military intelligence report and his death is no coincidence. The vilification and smear campaign launched against him, persistent attempts to link him to the New People's Army, and eventually accusing him of being a member of the armed rebel group are all systematic patterns to discredit him as a credible human rights defender, especially of people who are very poor and are also being accused by state security forces of either being supporters, if not outright members, of the rebel group and therefore are "enemies of the state." His staunch advocacy for human rights and fearless campaign to end violations of such has earned him the enmity of forces responsible for such violations.
2. It is very unusual, if not incredible, that Police Officer Eugene Bation was not harmed nor did he sustain any wound considering that the side of the van where he was seated sustained around five to six gun shots.
3. Testimonies of witnesses point to the fact that the perpetrators were expecting Fr. Lucero's group to pass by Maharlika Highway in the morning of 6 September. Considering the fact that Fr. Lucero's group changed their plans of returning to Catarman as an afterthought on the evening of 5 September, there is a strong possibility that someone close to Fr. Lucero that day could have tipped off the perpetrators.

4. Ruth Gecaro's abduction and disappearance at the time that she was supposed to help the NFFM to fetch and accompany the victims of human rights violations is deplorable and can only be viewed as an attempt to conceal the truth.
5. The incidence of human rights violations perpetrated with impunity in the province of Northern Samar is still alarming.
6. The exposition of the Military Intelligence report blatantly including several names in the Order of Battle list cannot be taken for granted.

#### Recommendations of the NFFM

1. That the Task Force Lucero look into the angle that Fr. Lucero's case is a case of one of the numerous extrajudicial killing cases under the *Oplan Bantay Laya* program.
2. That PO2 Bation be investigated.
3. That persons named in the Order of Battle list of the military file *writs of amparo* and *habeas data* for their protection and that the military be held accountable if something untoward happens to any person on the list while in the process of filing the said writs.
4. That a strong campaign to expose and oppose the human rights violations in the province and in the country be launched.

What we can do as individual or as a group:

- > Launch a signature campaign for a speedy resolution of Fr. Lucero's case
- > Conduct a group discussion on the human rights situation in the Philippines
- > Join activities that calls to end the extra-judicial killings and other human rights violations

*"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."* Edmund Burke

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