

# In Samar, farmers endure human rights violations due to militarization

Written by Portia Ladrido

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The anti-communist campaign of the Duterte administration is in motion, but getting caught in the crossfire between the military and the NPA are farmers who continue to fear for their lives. Photo by JILSON TIU

**Manila (CNN Philippines Life)** — Jovito Panjanustan, a resident of Brgy. San Miguel in Northern Samar, told his family he was going to their farm to get wood so he could build a house for his eldest daughter. He left at 9 in the morning, saying he would be back by noon for lunch.

Noon time came, but Jovito never showed up.

Later that day, another farmer came to tell Jovito's wife, Aida, that she should go to the farm as he had seen by soldiers questioning Jovito and accusing him of being a member of the outlawed New People's Army (NPA).

Aida scurried to the farm, searched through lines of coconut trees, but there was no sign of her husband.

later, they found Jovito — in a dug-up hole, unrecognizable, his head detached from his body, his heart

“Hindi ko na po siya namukhaan ... Grabe po kasi ang ginawa nila eh,” Jovito’s daughter, Annie, said weeping. “Binaboy po ‘yung pagkamatay ng tatay ko.”

She remembered how her mother ran to their farm, crying out Jovito's name in desperation; how two barangays gathered to look for her father. She remembered how watchful soldiers surrounded their house during Jovito’s wake; how her mother was made to sign a statement clearing the soldiers (later identified as members of the 34th Infantry Battalion of the 8th Infantry Division) of the murder. She recalled how her mother went to Tacloban to seek help – and justice.



“Hindi ko na po siya namukhaan ... Grabe po kasi ang ginawa nila eh,” Jovito’s daughter, Annie, said weeping. “Binaboy po ‘yung pagkamatay ng tatay ko.” Photo by JILSON TIU

Annie told of how she was passed from one relative to another, uncertain if her mother would ever come back for her.

“Mga seven years na wala pa ring hustisya ang pagkamatay ng tatay ko,” she noted.

Annie, her mother and two siblings, fled Samar and now live in Leyte.

Seven years later, Annie is still suffering the consequences of the gruesome murder of her father: insufficient finances and an unstable future. But her deepest pain comes from the unresolved trauma from her father’s bloody murder, a pain she will likely carry around until justice is served.

The now 19-year-old Annie kept repeating how her family's life had never been the same since Jovito’s brutal killing, occasionally bowing her head, pausing now and then as she re-lived a painful memory.

of Joseph to Panajustan happened in 2011, under the anti-communist campaign of the Benigno “Noynoy” administration. Similar counter-insurgency programs have also been present in previous administrations — Oplan Tandang Bato under Ferdinand Marcos, Oplan Tandang Bitag under Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos, Oplan Makabayan and Oplan Balangai under Joseph Estrada, and Oplan Bantay Laya under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

In “Report on the Extrajudicial Killings 2001-2010” by Atty. Al Parreño, a [research study](https://www.asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/ReportonPhilippineEJK20012010.pdf) (https://www.asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/ReportonPhilippineEJK20012010.pdf) funded by the Asia Foundation and USAID, it says that the Arroyo administration’s counterinsurgency program was “largely touted as responsible for the unabated epidemic of extrajudicial killings.” The report also says that “in 2005 and 2006, under the same administration, the incidences of extrajudicial killing was on its peak with a record of 66 (21.64 percent) and 70 (22.95 percent) cases, respectively.”

When Aquino assumed office on June 30, 2010, the report also states that the rates of killings are similar — Arroyo’s administration was recorded to have 2.5 killings per week in 2006, whereas Aquino’s was at 2 per week during the start of his presidency. The report, however, doesn’t identify if Aquino’s rate is a heritage of the past administration.

In terms of victims, the report states that Pampanga has the highest number of victims, followed by Negros Occidental and Northern Samar. Of these victims, 10 percent are farmers and peasant workers. Suspected and identified members or supporters of communist groups such as the New People’s Army (NPA) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) also make up eight percent of victims. Findings also show that “summary execution of suspected NPA members have been rampant in Northern Samar in the year 2005.” According to Parreño, “the military has denied any involvement in their killings.”

## **Arroyo’s administration was recorded to have 2.5 killings per week in 2006, whereas Aquino’s was at 2 per week during the start of his presidency.**

Today, under President Rodrigo Duterte, Oplan Kapayapaan is in motion. It is also unsympathetic to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the NPA. After the President declared the CPP a terrorist organization in 2017, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) vowed to [reduce the number of communist rebels by half](http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/01/09/AFP-aims-to-reduce-number-of-communist-rebels-by-half-in-2018.html) (http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/01/09/AFP-aims-to-reduce-number-of-communist-rebels-by-half-in-2018.html) by the following year.

Under Oplan Kapayapaan, seven farmers have been killed in Eastern Visayas, as reported by human rights group Movement Against Tyranny in its book, “Pag-lway.”

During a data-gathering field work in Samar in July 2018, delegates of the International Solidarity Mission (involving various human rights groups in Eastern Visayas) discovered that five public schools were used by soldiers as waiting areas for their operations. Three of the schools were in Northern Samar and two in Western Samar. Of the 18 barangays that participated in the focus group discussions, 15 had cases of community encampment — a violation of International Humanitarian Law.



# DUTERTE TALKS TO 803RD INFANTRY BRIGADE

Posted by **CNN Philippines**

54,866 Views

In October 2018, the President himself went to Catarman, Northern Samar to address the 803rd Infantry Brigade, encouraging the military to be remorseless in their fight against the NPA.

“Ang problema, kaya ako nandito, ang Sparrow [the NPA’s hit squad], lalo na Samar, heavily contaminated kayo sa NPA,” [he said](https://twitter.com/cnnphilippines/status/1047049281490890752) (https://twitter.com/cnnphilippines/status/1047049281490890752). “Beef up your intelligence na paglabas nila, patayin mo sila [NPA]. That’s the only rule in the game.”

On Nov. 22, Malacañang issued Memorandum No. 32, deploying more troops in Samar, Negros Oriental, Negros Occidental, and the Bicol Region.

The order followed a series of operations: in Guihulngan City in Negros Oriental on Oct. 30, where alleged communist rebels attacked policemen; in Libmanan, Camarines Sur on Nov. 17, where six policemen were injured in an ambush by the NPA; and in Lope De Vega, Northern Samar on Nov. 6, where two soldiers were wounded in an encounter with communist rebels.

It is worth noting that these places also have some of the [highest levels of poverty](http://pcij.org/stories/stats-on-the-state-of-the-regions-hubs-of-wealth-ponds-of-poverty/) (http://pcij.org/stories/stats-on-the-state-of-the-regions-hubs-of-wealth-ponds-of-poverty/). After Bicol and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Eastern Visayas is the third poorest region in the country.

Samar Island, known to be a haven for NPA rebels, remains one of the poorest areas in the whole Philippines. According to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism’s [2018 report](http://pcij.org/stories/stats-on-the-state-of-the-regions-hubs-of-wealth-ponds-of-poverty/) (http://pcij.org/stories/stats-on-the-state-of-the-regions-hubs-of-wealth-ponds-of-poverty/) on the state of the Philippine regions, Northern Samar has the highest poverty incidence among the provinces in Eastern Visayas, and the third highest in the country at 56.2 percent. Western Samar follows as the second poorest in the region at 46.9 percent.

As the NPA [focused on gaining support](http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/149) (http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/149) in rural areas in its campaign to stage a revolution among peasants, the AFP centered its counter-insurgency efforts in depressed areas.

(1)



Samar Island, known to be a haven for NPA rebels, remains one of the poorest areas in the whole Philippines. Photo by JILSON TIU



Northern Samar has the highest poverty incidence among the provinces in Eastern Visayas, and the third highest in the country at 56.2 percent. Western Samar follows as the second poorest in the region at 46.9 percent. Photo by JILSON TIU

(4) This CSP will also help to thwart the communist in collecting extortion money from the citizens," he added in a text message to this writer.

In an interview, he said their main goals were to provide services to these communities as well as secure and protect the barangays from the ideology of communists, noting that the level of poverty in areas such as Northern and Western Samar makes them ripe for NPA recruitment.

"Pag sinabi nating depressed na lugar, 'yun 'yung mga pinupuntahan ng mga armado, ng mga NPA, mga komunista, mga terorista," Agno explained. "Ang focus [ng AFP] is to deliver basic services coming from the government to the people na kailangan ng serbisyo ... kasi primary na problem 'yan lalong-lalo na sa mga depressed barangay na kung saan nakakapag-recruit 'yung mga NPA."

But based on data collected by ISM, it appears that with the military presence came human rights violations perpetrated on farmers in particular barangays.

In the last two years, soldiers have come to the houses of farmers without telling barangay officials, according to the ISM. The group noted incidents of soldiers forcing civilians to admit to being part of the NPA; a middle-of-the-night military strafing incident; soldiers, armed with M4 rifles, accusing frightened coconut farmers, of being communist rebels; and troops positioned in fields, preventing farmers from working.

Agno dismissed all this as mere allegations of locals influenced by communists.



After Bicol and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Eastern Visayas is the third poorest region in the country. Photo by JILSON TIU

**Northern Samar**

hour ride from Tacloban, Leyte to Catarman, Northern Samar, a two-hour habal-habal commute through  
 s and in J... (life) in a vast expanse of land — where children under the age of 12 carrying buckets of  
 ks of ce g... (ast us — we arrived in Brgy. San Francisco.

(2) Berna\*, a feisty woman not over five feet tall, greeted us at the entrance of the barangay. She led us to her home, a stilt house largely made of wood with a nipa roof. After a few pleasantries, she began a litany of the hardship people in the barangay have gone through because of the presence of the AFP in their area.

“Sa aming [sakanan] ...pinipilit talaga kami na mga members kami ng NPA,” she began. “Pag alam naming may operation [‘yung AFP,] hindi kami pumupunta [sa sakanan] kaya nagtitis na lang kami na minsan wala nang kain ng tatlong beses sa isang araw.”

Berna’s voice went up the more she talked about their everyday problems: not enough food, not enough income, not enough work, the constant threat enveloping their once peaceful community. What was worse, she shared, was when the AFP and the NPA had an encounter in the nearby Barangay San Miguel, where Annie’s family used to live and where her son went to school.

“Nagpalitan sila ng putok eh di ‘yung anak ko tumalon sa bintana ng eskwelahan,” she recalled. “Mula noon, wala na. Hindi na pumasok ‘yung anak ko.”



On our way to Brgy. San Francisco in Northern Samar, we passed by these military jeeps lined up by the road. Photo by JILSON TIU

(1)



The military camp that we passed by on our way to Brgy. San Francisco in Northern Samar. Photo by JILSON TIU



The dirt road going to Brgy. San Francisco in Northern Samar. Photo by JILSON TIU



soldiers were camping out in the barangay hall, staying in farmers' houses, or roaming around the school. a high school. Berna's son is the only one near Berna's house but because of the military presence, she then stopped studying since she couldn't afford to send him to a school farther away.

A few houses down Berna's home is a bigger two-story house made of hard wood and bamboo. It is owned by Ronald\*, another farmer whose son was at a school party when a drunk soldier suddenly barged in, interrogated him, and demanded that he was a NPA member.

Ronald and the barangay captain went straight to the Commanding Officer to complain.

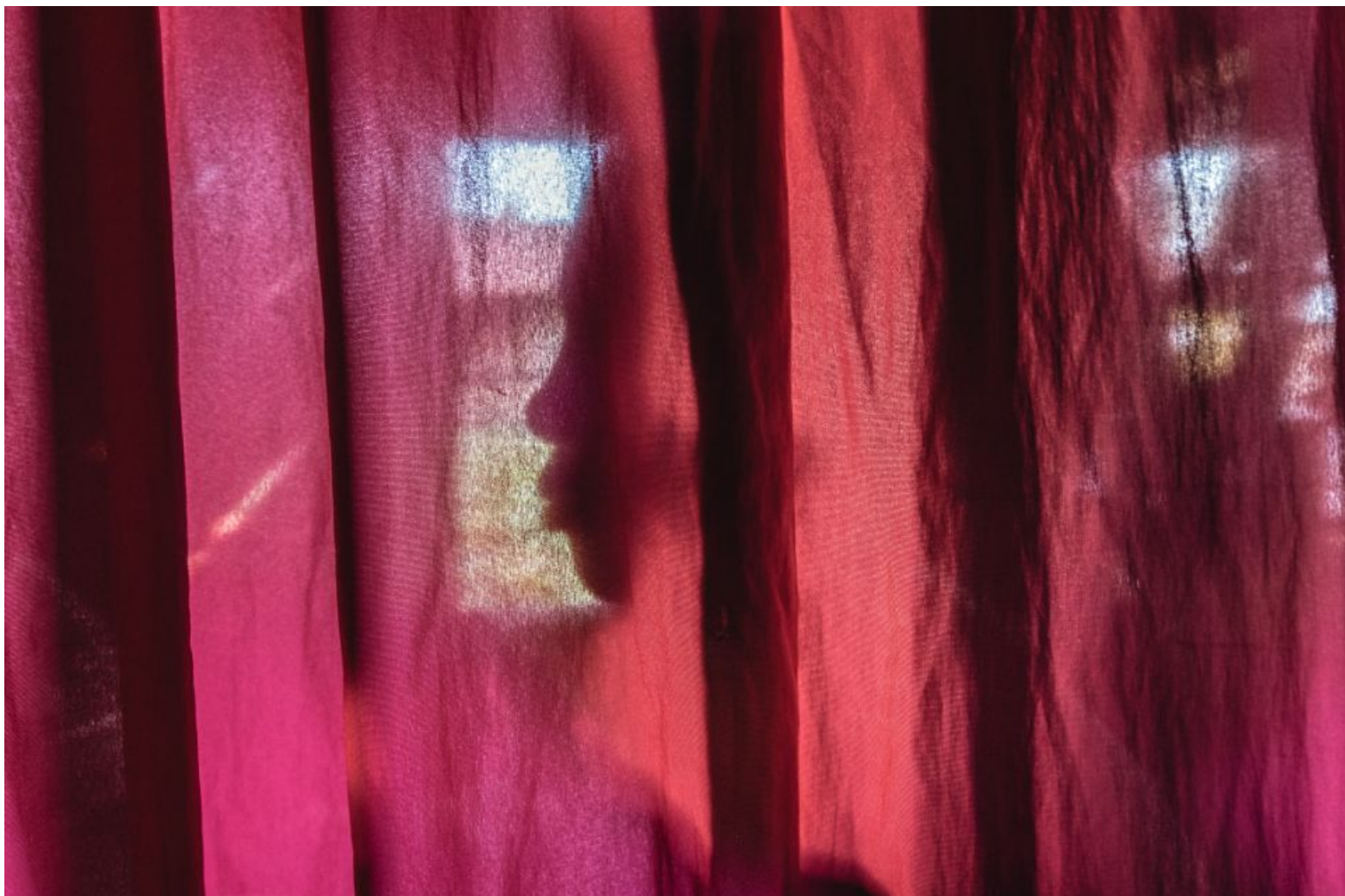
"Doon sa pag-uusap namin, sabi niya na siya na lang ang bahala sa sundalo. Tapos humingi ng pasensya kasi lasing nga daw lang," he recalled. "Sabi ko, kung ganon ang gagawin niyo sa mga sibilyan, talagang maraming mag-aaklas, maraming aakyat ng bundok kasi dahil na rin sa ginagawa ninyong pang-aabuso."

Ronald's son is still traumatized by the incident and even considered quitting school altogether, but his father would not hear of it. He is determined to make sure all his children finish school and because he is a strong believer in education as the only way out of poverty.

Ronald, who sells copra, has also taken a blow because of the military operations. He never goes to his coconut farm without company anymore, especially after another farmer working alone in the fields was also harassed.

Soldiers reportedly wrapped cellophane around this farmer's head until he confessed to being an NPA member. After his barangay captain proved to the soldiers this was not true, they gave the farmer two cans of sardines as a peace offering.

"Kaya pagka may operasyon ang militar, kadalasan na nandito na rin ang mga tao sa barangay, hindi na nagtatrabaho," Ronald said.



"Sa aming [sakan] ...pinipilit talaga kami na mga members kami ng NPA," said Berna\*. "Pag alam naming may operation [yung AFP], hindi kami pumupunta [sa sakan] kaya nagtitiis na lang kami na minsan wala nang kain ng tatlong beses sa isang araw." Photo by JILSON TIU



Farmers in Northern Samar largely rely on selling copra (dried meat kernel) to survive. Photo by JILSON TIU

## Western Samar

Around four hours from Northern Samar is Catbalogan, the provincial capital. After two hours of travel through rough roads at night with only the tricycle headlight to guide us, we arrived in Brgy. Concepcion. It was pitch-black, the silence broken only by murmurs and the faint sound of a television program.

We went straight to the barangay captain's house only to be told we could not stay for security reasons. A konsehal hosted us instead. As he led us to his two-story corner house, some residents peeped through their windows at us. Our translator told us that some farmers were quite wary of our presence, asking if we could do our interviews right away and leave first thing in the morning. They were saying the military was just around earlier and could be back soon.

**“Noong kay Palparan, nakatakbo kami sa Maynila noon. Kasi lahat ng mga suspetsado nila, nakalista, kinukuha talaga, pinapatay,” a farmer said.**

Inside the house, the farmers spoke in soft whispers, telling us their stories over a meal of canned tuna. Tomas\*, an 89-year-old farmer, was unaware that he was being red-tagged until neighbors told him the military believed he was making clothes for the NPA.

“Nagiging alert na [ako] sa mga bagay-bagay. Baka anytime soon may gawin na sa [akin],” he said in Waray.

After rumors about his link to the NPA began to go around, intelligence officers had been going around his house looking for signs of subversion. Tomas was originally from Brgy. San Nicolas, but left after witnessing many peasant killings during martial law.

...later, Prgy Concepcion also became the target of AFP operations, especially during the term of former President Duterte. (Wife) Palparan led the anti-communist drive of former President Gloria Arroyo from 2001 to 2006 in Central Luzon, Mindoro, Romblon, and Eastern Visayas.

(4) Noong kay Palparan, nakatakbo kami sa Maynila noon. Kasi lahat ng mga suspetsado nila, nakalista, kinukuha talaga, pinapatay,” another farmer said. “Tapos bumalik din ako dito kasi ‘di ko naman kaya magtrabaho doon [sa Manila] kasi ayokong magtrabaho sa construction.”

During Palparan’s time as head of the 8th Infantry Division in Eastern Visayas, [human rights group Karapatan recorded 570 cases of human rights violations against 7,651 people in a span of only six months.](https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/09/18/18/fall-of-the-butcher-reckoning-comes-for-palparan-after-12-years) (https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/09/18/18/fall-of-the-butcher-reckoning-comes-for-palparan-after-12-years) Another [report](http://easternvista.com/news/1410/) (http://easternvista.com/news/1410/) said that there were 19 cases of extrajudicial killings, 12 enforced disappearances, and 25 torture cases in the six months Palparan stayed in the region.

In September 2018, Palparan was [found guilty](http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/09/17/palparan-kidnapping-up-students-guilty.html) (http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/09/17/palparan-kidnapping-up-students-guilty.html) of kidnapping and serious illegal detention of two students of the University of the Philippines who have never been found.



During General Jovito Palparan’s time as head of the 8th Infantry Division in Eastern Visayas, human rights group Karapatan recorded 570 cases of human rights violations against 7,651 people in a span of only six months. Photo from GERG CAHILES/CNN PHILIPPINES FILE

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In December 2017, the Northern Samar Small Farmers Association [filed a case](http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_17/HR01549.pdf) (http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic\_17/HR01549.pdf) against members of the military implementing Oplan Kapayapaan.

In their complaint, the farmers listed instances of illegal arrest and detention, physical assault, and other human rights abuses by the 20th Infantry Battalion of the 8th Infantry Division and the 803rd Infantry Brigade, the Infantry Brigade that President Duterte addressed during his visit to Catarman, Northern Samar in October last year.

Agno dismissed these kinds of claims.

In full military camouflage garb at his office in Camp Crame, Detoyato shook my hand, led me to a chair in front of his table where he eventually settled, the Philippine flag standing behind him.

He opened a green folder, scanned the papers inside it, and proceeded to tell about how the AFP complies with the International Humanitarian Law. Asked about the human rights violations relayed by the farmers, he said they did not receive any complaints.

He then read from the first page of the green folder a response from Brigade Commander Ramil Bitong of the 803rd Infantry Brigade in Northern Samar.

“It is not our practice to tag anyone as NPA without evidence. There are, however, reports from left-leaning organizations, Northern Samar Small Farmers and [human rights organization] Katungod, that are agitating the population and were able to convince a few to complain against the presence of the army,” he said.

Detoyato also cited the response of the AFP HR office head saying the same thing, adding that there were no pending investigations for 2018, and no record of any human rights violations of any AFP personnel.

**“We do not expect them to say good things about the military, about the government, because they’ve been fighting the government for the past 50 years.” — Col. Noel Detoyato**

I pointed out the farmers’ complaints about encampments, harassment, their fears. Detoyato asked for the source of the information, implying that those who raised these concerns might already be tainted with communist ideology.

“We do not expect them to say good things about the military, about the government, because they’ve been fighting the government for the past 50 years,” he explained. “Kahit anong gawin ng ating gobyerno, they will always oppose because that is their role in life.”

Detoyato explained that the military tries to win the hearts and minds of the community they enter through civil operations or projects and constant conversation with the population.

But a number of organizations raised concern about alleged human rights violations committed by the AFP in Eastern Visayas. Human rights groups such as Katungod, the Movement Against Tyranny, Karapatan, Bayan, Anakbayan, and Sagupa consolidated reports on “state terrorism” in the region in 2017 to 2018 in the book, “Pag-iway.”

The Commission on Human Rights, and the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) also monitor military abuses and have programs to engage and educate AFP personnel on human rights practices.

Rose Trajano, secretary general of PAHRA, said the AFP’s common justification for what others describe as military abuses is that in an operation, some level of damage is inevitable. She said the AFP normally investigates only cases that are clearly despicable, such as a massacre.

“Kung gross ang violation, masyadong obvious, they couldn’t hide it, they would do some investigation. Merong mga pagkakataon na mapaparusan ‘yan pero not as much,” Trajano noted. “Karaniwan hindi na nakakatanggap ng compensation ‘yung victims.”

She added that military personnel usually ask her why they were questioned and blamed for these incidents instead of the “enemies of the government” — like the NPA and the Abu Sayyaf.

She said that the concept of human rights is also distorted under the current administration and Duterte's popular quote that he is concerned about human lives as differentiated from human rights only created confusion.



PHOTO BY KING RODRIGUEZ/ PPD

More than other administrations, the government under Duterte had significantly helped soldiers by doubling their salaries. Photo from CNN PHILIPPINES FILE

Detoyato insisted that the AFP is aware that their first and foremost task is to protect civilians at all costs.

"You fail in your mission kahit na-neutralize niyo ang kalaban. If you fail to protect civilians, you still fail," he said.

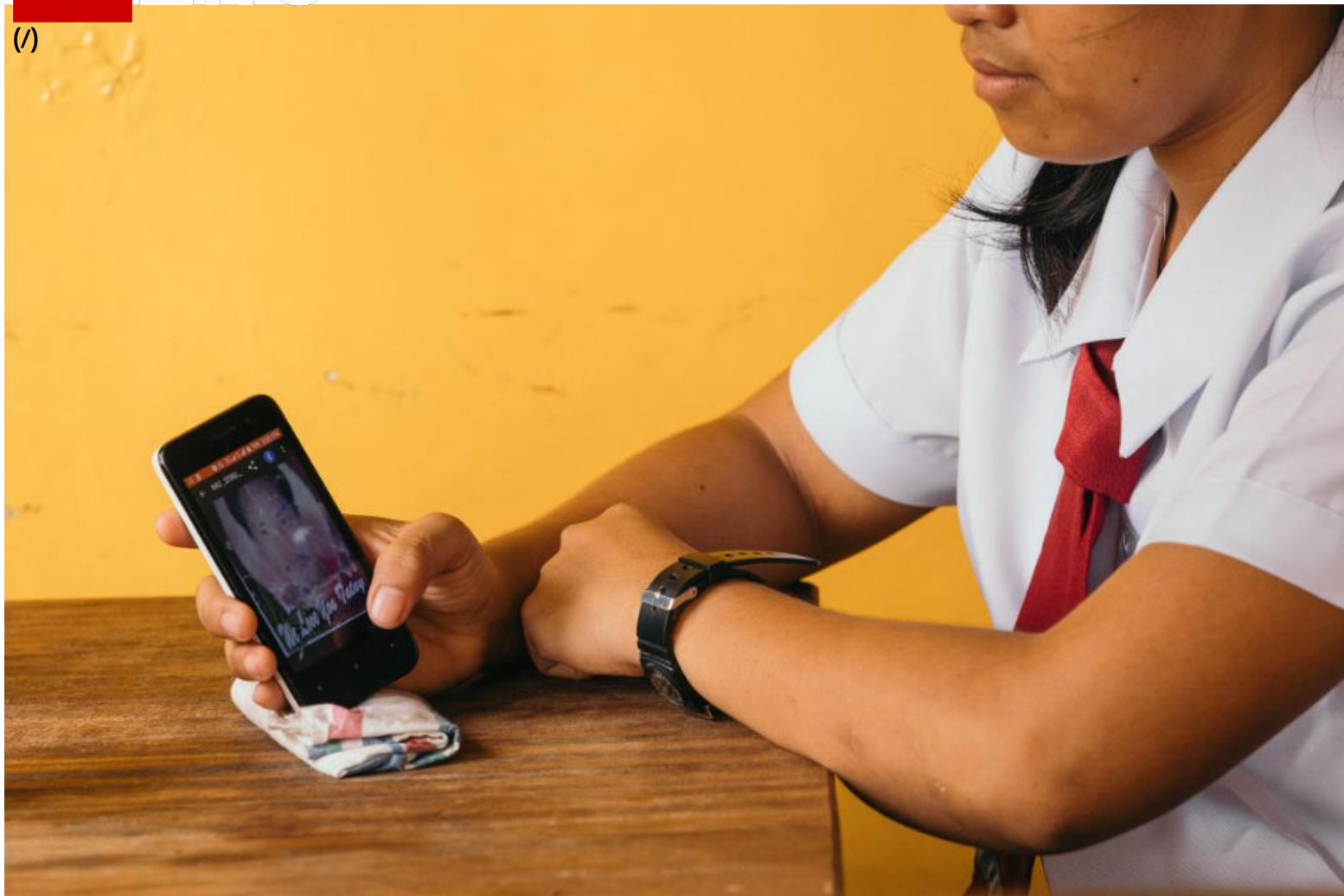
He spoke of his experiences on the ground: how the troops endure time away from their families to serve the country, doing almost everything to gain the trust of communities. They taught farmers how to do the math so they can weigh their crops properly, provided lessons on planting different crops, and helped them secure titles for their land, he said.

And, of course, many soldiers have been killed in the line of duty. Last April, only a week after President Duterte urged the NPA (<http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/4/17/duterte-cpp-npa-ndf-peace-talks-ceasefire.html>) to give up their arms, six soldiers died (<http://www.cnnphilippines.com/regional/2019/4/23/samar-clash-NPA.html>) in a clash with the NPA in Samar.

More than other administrations, the government under Duterte had significantly helped soldiers by doubling their salaries. Detoyato said that when he was a young cadet in the Philippine Military Academy in 1990, his daily allowance was only ₱30. Today, foot soldiers receive ₱150 a day.

"Alam mo 'yung tropa natin 'pag nag-o-operate, they're always thinking, 'Meron ba kaming isasaing sa bahay ngayon?'" Detoyato said. "Ngayon, hindi nila iniisip 'yun kasi they know we have enough."

But Trajano sees it differently. She said that the increase in the salaries (<http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/01/03/Cops-soldiers-government-officials-payhike.html>) of policemen and soldiers betrayed Duterte's strongman tendencies, his way of exacting loyalty to him from the troops.



Annie showing a picture of her father, Jovito Panajustan, a farmer who was brutally murdered in Northern Samar. Photo by JILSON TIU

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Since Jovito's headless body was found buried in a shallow hole, Annie's life had changed in ways she didn't know was possible.

"Yung buhay namin masasabi ko pong ibang-iba na," she said, her voice breaking, tears trickling down her face. "Yung mga may kasalanan 'yung mga sundalo kasi sila 'yung dahilan kung bakit nagbago ang buhay namin. Maganda 'yung buhay namin noon tapos ngayon parang hindi na [namin] kaya."

Many administrations have come and gone; several counter-insurgency programs have been put in place, and yet peasant farmers like Jovito, Berna, Ronald, Tomas, along with their families, are still struggling to make ends meet, still trying to make sense of insurmountable odds.

Caught in the crossfire between government forces and rebels, they continue to fear for their lives as they hope for some semblance of justice.

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*\*Names have been changed to protect their privacy.*

*Portia Ladrido is a 2018 PANTAO Human Rights Journalism Fellow of the Philippine Human Rights Information Center.*



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International Edition 

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