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Dismantling of IALAG, Arroyo's Shadowy Agency, 'Just for Show'

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By RONALYN V. OLEA

Human Rights Watch

Bulatlat

MANILA – Unless the Arroyo regime released all the individuals it has thrown to jail for politically motivated and fabricated charges, the abolition last month of the agency behind these cases will amount to nothing but a publicity stunt, according to lawyers and human-rights advocates.

If anything, they said, the abolition last May 15 of the Inter-Agency Legal Action Group (IALAG), an agency created by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo that has attained a shadowy character, only affirmed the allegation that the government used underhanded means to silence its critics.

Moreover, the abolition of IALAG was seen as a victory for human rights. Earlier in the week, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita announced that the dismantling of the agency was in response to the recommendation of Philip Alston, the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings.

"It has been exposed that the IALAG has no purpose but to persecute progressive leaders and members of party-list groups and people's organizations," lawyer Jobert Pahilga of the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL) told Bulatlat in an interview. "It is in this sense that the abolition of the IALAG can be considered an 'initial victory' for human-rights advocates."

Formed in January 2006 through Executive Order 493, the IALAG was mandated "to provide effective and efficient handling and coordination of the investigative and prosecutorial aspects of the fight against threats to national security" and "address specific offenses that constitute threats to national security including but not limited to cases of rebellion, sedition and related offenses."

Human-rights groups said IALAG is responsible for the filing of trumped-up charges against activists, the fabrication of witnesses, the bending of judicial processes, and violations of due process. It has also been blamed by international and local human-rights groups for violating the rights of the Filipino people.

Human-rights advocates deemed that the abolition of the IALAG is only for show as the filing of trumped-up charges against activists as well as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and other rights abuses continue.

International Pressure

Ermita, who is also the chairman of the Presidential Human Rights Committee, noted that the abolition of the IALAG was among the recommendations of Alston, who visited the country in February 2007 to investigate the spate of killings in the country.

"This will show that we are responsive to his [Alston's] recommendations because he thinks that this IALAG is an instrument for violation of human rights of insurgents as well as those identified with the insurgents like the militant groups, which is not necessarily true. To remove such question, the President decided, 'Okay, let's just abolish IALAG'," Ermita said during a briefing at the presidential palace.

In his [follow-up report](#) ^[1] to the United Nations Human Rights Council dated April 29, Alston

said that the central purpose of IALAG remains to prosecute and punish members of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its purported front groups as enemies of the state, many of whom will not be reachable by legal processes.

Pahilga said the dismantling of IALAG was just for show. "Now that the cases of extrajudicial killings have been increasing again, they need to do something to protect their image."

The IALAG is composed of the Office of the National Security Adviser (NSA), Department of Justice, Department of National Defense, Department of Interior and Local Government, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), Philippine National Police (PNP), National Bureau of Investigation and other units tasked by national security adviser Norberto Gonzales, who heads the IALAG.

Pahilga, the deputy secretary-general for campaigns and advocacy of the NUPL, explained how the IALAG works: "The PNP and the AFP would gather so-called 'evidence' against the targets of the IALAG. The DOJ then would resolve whether or not to file a case. But the preliminary investigation is already tainted; there is no more impartiality because as members of the IALAG, these agencies must complement one another. They have been ordered by Arroyo to file fabricated charges."

Pahilga said the IALAG is a component of the Arroyo government's counter-insurgency program.

Vital Player

Lawyer Julius Garcia Matibag, NUPL member and legal counsel of the office of Bayan Muna Rep. Teodoro Casiño, said the inclusion of the DOJ in the IALAG is inconsistent with the ethical administration of justice. "The role of prosecutors is not to convict but to see that justice is done," Matibag said, quoting from the Code of Professional Responsibility of Lawyers.

"By being a vital player in the IALAG, the DOJ has prejudged complaints in favor of the complainants," Matibag said. "It would certainly be unlikely if the DOJ would resolve the complaint against the complainants for that would mean the DOJ turning against itself."

In all the complaints that were filed courtesy of the IALAG, Pahilga said, there was no substantial evidence.

Pahilga cited the rebellion charges against the so-called [Batasan 6](#) ^[2] or the party-list representatives, the [Leyte](#) ^[3] and Nueva Ecija murder charges against Bayan Muna Rep. Satur Ocampo and Casiño, Anakpawis Rep. Rafael Mariano and Gabriela Rep. Liza Maza, as well as the [Southern Tagalog 72](#) ^[4], the [Southern Tagalog 27](#) ^[5], the new [Rizal murder charges](#) ^[6] against Southern Tagalog activists, [Tagaytay 5](#) ^[7] and other trumped-up cases against leaders of progressive groups in Cebu and Davao.

"The IALAG acted like an investigator, prosecutor and judge," Pahilga said. "There is no due process because the agencies under the IALAG have a preconceived notion that the respondents in their trumped-up charges are guilty."

Long Overdue

In a separate statement, the human-rights group Karapatan said the abolition of the IALAG is long overdue and is nothing but a confirmation that the agency has time and again been used by state agents to violate human rights.

Randall Echanis, a peasant leader, was arrested in January 2008 for multiple murder. He was accused of involvement in a so-called purge of the New People's Army in the 1980s. He is presently detained at the Manila City Jail.

Echanis, in a statement, said the IALAG abolition "demonstrates that this case is nothing but

political persecution against me and a product of Ms. Arroyo's cabinet security cluster's dirty imagination."

Echanis said the abolition of the IALAG will be useless unless the Arroyo government drops all the false and malicious charges filed against activists.

Karapatan called for the immediate release of political prisoners charged with common crimes.

Total Failure

Pahilga said the Arroyo regime is mistaken in thinking that the IALAG has been successful, as claimed by Ermita. "Contrary to the statement of Arroyo, it's a total failure." In her EO, Arroyo said the IALAG has already accomplished its mandate.

Pahilga said that some of the cases filed by the IALAG were dismissed for lack of evidence. "The charges have been exposed as fabricated and that the IALAG has no purpose but to harass leaders of the Left."

Matibag recalled that Chief Justice Reynato Puno, in the Supreme Court decision dismissing the rebellion charges against the Batasan 6, admonished public prosecutors not to allow their office to be used or prostituted for political objectives.

No Cause for Celebration

Pahilga said that even without the IALAG, the persecution of critics and activists will continue. "The abolition of the IALAG would hardly create any change in the attitude of the Arroyo regime toward its perceived enemies."

"The formal structure may have been dismantled but the machinery of the government remains intact; it will still be used against the activists. They have completed the process of filing legal offensives," Pahilga said.

Karapatan said atrocities against political activists have not ceased, citing the murder of peasant activist [Fermin Lorico](#) ^[8] and the raid of a meeting of [party-list groups in Cagayan Valley](#) ^[9].

The human-rights watchdog noted Ermita's statement saying that the government has "other means of monitoring the activities of those trying to destabilize the government."

It is possible, Karapatan said, "that the Arroyo administration will not stand down from targeting unarmed individuals calling for genuine social change."

It reiterated that Arroyo should be held accountable for the gross human-rights violations in her nine years of power. "A vital step in obtaining justice for the victims is her removal from Malacañang," Karapatan said. ([Bulatlat.com](#)) ^[10]

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[1] follow-up report: <http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2009/05/09/political-killings-linked-to-gma%e2%80%99s-order-to-end-insurgency/>

[2] Batasan 6: <http://www.bulatlat.com/news/6-28/6-28-batasan6.htm>

- [3] Leyte : <http://www.bulatlat.com/news/7-7/7-7-dead.htm>
- [4] Southern Tagalog 72: <http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2008/11/15/charges-vs-72-southern-tagalog-activists-baseless-%E2%80%93-lawyer/>
- [5] Southern Tagalog 27: <http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2008/10/04/27-southern-tagalog-activists-charged-with-burning-of-globe-cell-site/>
- [6] Rizal murder charges: <http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2009/02/16/newly-freed-lawyer-activists-slapped-anew-with-murder-raps/>
- [7] Tagaytay 5: <http://www.pinoypress.net/2008/08/29/tagaytay-5-freed-trumped-up-charges-dropped/>
- [8] Fermin Lorico: <http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2009/06/11/a-peasant-leaders-murder-shatters-the-peace-in-dumaguete/>
- [9] party-list groups in Cagayan Valley: <http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2009/06/11/party-list-groups-meeting-in-cagayan-valley-raided-by-soldiers/>
- [10] (Bulatlat.com): <http://www.bulatlat.com/>

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