

Teenagers Perish in Davao's Killing Fields

 by CARLOS H. CONDE

This two-part story investigates the killing of teenagers in Davao City. The teenagers are casualties in the city's unorthodox, if brutal, campaign, against crime. As davao-based journalist Carlos H. Conde writes, NGOs have tallied 20 young people age 18 and below have been knifed or gunned to death there since March 1999.

The writer begins with the story of Clarita Alia, who is spending a mournful Christmas this year, as it has been just weeks since her 14-year old son was killed by unknown men. Two of Alia's other sons, one 18, the other 16, have been similarly summarily executed in the last two years.

Killings such as these have the tacit support of many Davaoeños, who see them as the price that has to be paid to keep the city safe. But child-rights NGOs say the killings have not had an impact on juvenile crime — in fact statistics show that they are increasing — and that they do not address the root of the problem, which is poverty and family abuse.

Clarita Alia's story, which is told in both parts, shows how a family broken apart by poverty and physical violence provides a fertile breeding ground for juvenile crime. But as Davao City mayor Rodrigo Duterte argues, "if we all go into a social study of poverty, we will all be killed."

DAVAO CITY — In one of the many hovels crammed inside Bankerohan, this city's largest public market, Christmas is about to come and go unnoticed once more. While the Alia family is no stranger to a joyless Christmas, this year's yuletide has been exceptionally sad. The family is still mourning the death of yet another Alia child, who last month was added to a growing list of teenagers sacrificed in a brutal war against crime.

Clarita Alia, who hauls vegetables in a tiny cart for a living, used to have eight children. Now she has only five. She lost her second child Richard in July 2001. Three months later, it was Christopher's turn. Next was Bobby, who died just this November.



Richard was only 18 when he was killed, while Christopher was 16, and Bobby, 14. All three were knifed to death, and while authorities have done little to investigate their cases, practically everyone assumes their deaths were part of the extra-judicial killings that have been plaguing Davao City in the last few years.

A significant number of those killed have been minors who had been in conflict with the law - just like the Alia brothers. Tambayan, a local child-rights group, estimates that at least 104 people, most of them male, have been victims of such extra-judicial killings since August 1998.

Of the 41 cases documented by the group from March 1999 to November this year, 20 involved boys who were 18 years old and below. Not one of these cases has been solved, even if the killers said to range from gang members, to ex-rebels, to policemen are known in the local community.

For a city touted to be the country's largest, Davao in the last several years has been able to keep an enviable peace-and-order record. Unlike in other urban centers, one can walk Davao's streets even at 2 a.m. with few worries about being mugged. Police visibility is good, and Davaoeños take pride in the fact that there has not been any gang wars in their city for quite a while now. For this reason, Davao has become the envy of other cities, which now want to follow in its footsteps.

That, however, may mean taking a very bloody path. Clarita Alia is not alone in believing her three young sons and others like them have been killed as part of what is popularly seen as a successful, if unorthodox, strategy for battling crime.

The public's tacit support for the killings is one reason local authorities, including the police, do not appear interested in finding the killers. Many Davaoeños believe that the executions are helping keep their city safe and do not seem to care that minors are among those being killed as part of a campaign against youth offenders, many of whom are petty thieves.

This is why Davaoeños support Rodrigo Duterte, their tough-talking mayor, who has made it well known that he will stop at nothing to fight criminals.

“I tell the people during elections: If you want a mayor that doesn’t kill criminals, look for another mayor,” Duterte told the PCIJ in a recent interview. “I was elected in 1988, reelected in 1992, reelected in 1995, reelected in 2001. That’s my gauge of people’s acceptance.”

Still, the mayor, who is also President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s anti-crime consultant, denied having any direct connections with the killings. “I would like to give you this assurance that I have never ordered the killing of anyone,” he said. “If I (ever) suggested that I’m abetting it, well, I will have to live with that.”

In late September last year, Duterte described the series of killings of suspected criminals as unlawful. But he also made it clear he was hardly sorry that they were happening. “I do not have any tears for you if you die, you idiots!” he said, referring to drug pushers. “You all deserved to die.”

Last March, Duterte once again declared war against teenage gangs, which the local police say are responsible for most of the crimes committed in the city. “If they offer resistance,” the mayor told reporters here, “I will not hesitate to kill them. I don’t care about minors.”

Such declarations have upset child-rights advocates, including Councilor Angela Librado. The chair of the City Council’s committee on women and children, Librado notes that while the mayor “hasn’t really violated any law,” his statements “send the wrong signal to the public. The signal is that, it’s okay for these people to die because they are useless anyway.”

If anything, Duterte’s contempt for teenage gangs and his encouragement of extra-judicial methods to deal with them have made children in conflict with the law fair game. Two weekends ago, three minors who had had brushes with the police were killed in separate incidents by unknown assailants.

One of the casualties was Alexander Buenaventura, a 19-year old toughie who was gunned down on Dec. 15. Duterte had singled him out in his TV program in March. “Dodong,” the mayor called out to Buenaventura on the air, “I’m warning you, our paths will cross one day.”

But child-rights advocates say the most daring display of contempt toward “useless” children happened in October last year. As activists prepared to march around the city to condemn yet another rash of killings of juveniles that month, gunmen shot dead two minors right in one of the streets the demonstrators had planned to take in the downtown area. The boys had been suspected snatchers. Said Ariel Balofinos, advocacy officer of the Kabiba Alliance for Children’s Concerns: “We are really angry. It’s as if the killings were staged in time for our rally.”

A few days later, Sr. Insp. Leonardo Felonia, chief of the San Pedro Police Station, declared that the extra-judicial killings targeting children in conflict with the law were a “practical” way to deal with crime. At least 18 extra-judicial killings have taken place within the jurisdiction of the San Pedro Police Station, which also covers Bankerohan, where most of the city’s teenage gangs come from.

Like Duterte, the police have washed their hands of the killings. But this has not stopped many people from speculating that local authorities are behind all these, even if the media keep on pushing the idea of the existence of a Davao Death Squad or DDS.

“The DDS has no face,” observes Tambayan program officer Pilgrim Guasa. “But when you ask gang members and their families, they can pinpoint who are the ones doing all these killings. Usually, these killers have a connection one way or the other to policemen, ex-policemen, assets, civilian law enforcers. There are those who say some of the killers are former New People’s Army rebels. One thing is certain: the killers are known in the community.”

Why none of these self-styled executioners has been caught is explained by Bernie Mondragon, executive director of the Kabataan Consortium, a group of child-rights NGOs: “Of course no one would want to come out and testify. Who would? This is the usual line by the police: no witness, no case. But I think that, deep inside, the police think the killings are valid and justified, hence the inaction.”

Guasa says child-rights advocates are frustrated by the Davaoños reaction to the killings. Most of the callers in phone-in surveys conducted by local TV stations invariably say they are for the killings. Alice, an office clerk, echoes the sentiment of many here when she says the targeting of suspected criminals “somehow makes me feel safe. I know that anybody who does something bad to me in the street will someday meet his comeuppance.”

Guasa theorizes that such an attitude could be traced in part to the city’s “history of being used as a laboratory for violence.” By that, she is referring to the 1980s, when vigilante groups were roaming the city, summarily

executing suspected communist rebels who in turn were killing policemen. The incidents prompted some people to call the Agdao district, where most of the killings were then occurring, as “Nicaragdao.”

In a way, says Guasa, “the public has been desensitized by the summary executions. Most worrisome of all is that they perceive extra-judicial killings as a practical solution, especially when it is a means to maintain peace and order.”

Councilor Librado, for her part, says her committee had asked the Davao City Police Office to submit a report to on the killings. All they got, she says, was a table containing a summary of the killings, which can be obtained from the police blotter. “No in-depth investigation, no determination of culpability,” says Librado. “There was nothing new in it.”

Most of the agencies approached by her committee to investigate the matter also said they could not do anything because there weren’t any complainants. She says even the National Bureau of Investigation only “took for granted” the committee’s resolution requesting for an investigation into the child killings.

Librado recounts, “I told them, We are talking here of specific killings targeting minors. There could be a trend here. We expect agencies to initiate all the moves so facts could be drawn.”

“The funny thing is,” she adds, “I was invited to a forum once where mothers and relatives told us that they were willing to file charges.”

Gang members interviewed by the PCIJ said that criminal syndicates are behind some of the killings. In others, the hits are ordered by rival gangs. But the gang members also say many of the murders are contract killings. Says one gang member: “There was a time when the killers in the community would bid for the contract those who bid the lowest gets to kill the prey.”

Sometimes, the assassin is handpicked. Gani (not his real name), a member of one of the most notorious gangs in this city, was only 17 years old when he was given P500 to kill an alleged drug pusher. A few months later, he was asked again to kill another pusher. He was paid P350 for that one. He was approached a third time for another hit. But the victim survived, and those who contracted Gani refused to pay him the P350 they had promised him. Gani is now in hiding, after receiving death threats.

A former gang member who wants to be called “Bing” says that in a number of instances, the preferred killers are the butchers at Bankerohan, and their weapon of choice is the kolonyal, the butcher’s knife.

In the Tambayan’s tally of killings since March 1999, however, 30 or 73 percent of the total were done with a gun, usually a .45 caliber pistol, the same weapon issued to the police force. In such hits, the victim is usually shot in the head and at close range. Some child-rights advocates say it would not be a stretch to claim that these killings were done not by gang members, who like to use makeshift arrows and knives, but by people with considerable experience in handling firearms.

Gang members say that more often than not, the targets are first given a warning. Bing, for one, says that in 1998, a policeman living in their community approached him and said, “If you don’t mend your ways, you’re dead.” Bing wasted no time in reforming himself. He now goes to school and hardly goes out with his gangmates anymore.

Clarita Alia also says, “I had been told not just once that I should tell my children to stop what they’re doing or else they’d be dead.” She readily admits that her late sons had figured in snatchings, drugs and all sorts of petty crime in Bankerohan. She adds that their names eventually landed on the OB (order of battle) of the police.

Before Richard’s death on July 17 last year, police went to the Alia home to arrest the teenager for rape. Nanay Clarita asked them for evidence but when the police said they did not have any yet, she refused to turn over her child to them.

“They told me I was stupid for protecting my son,” Nanay Clarita says. Richard had also been warned by unidentified men that his name was third on their list. It soon became common knowledge in Bankerohan that the Alia brothers were marked for liquidation. More than two weeks before Richard was killed, his siblings were already hearing that he was in danger.

Tambayan’s Guasa confirms that other victims were told beforehand of being in some list. “Before each killing, there were deliberate warnings to would-be victims that their names were on the list. They should stop or they would be killed,” she says.

Many believe these "lists" are lists of drug pushers and users in the community that are oftentimes prepared by the Barangay Anti-Drug Abuse Council (Badac). It was then President Joseph Estrada who had created the Badac through an executive order, which also says that anyone in the barangay can report to the Council who the users or pushers are in the community.

These same lists end up in the hands of the Regional Anti-Narcotics Office, the police and local officials. But Guasa says that the problem with the Badac lists is that anybody can just point a finger on someone without presenting proof. "If the police have a case against somebody on the list, why not file a case against that person?" she asks. "Why supplant due process with these lists?"

Nanay Clarita herself asks between sobs, "My sons may have committed crimes, but why are they being butchered? The people who do this why do they think the lives of my sons are not worth anything? Is it because we're dirt poor? Is this why due process does not apply to us?"

Poverty and Family Abuse Force Davao's Children to the Streets

 by CARLOS H. CONDE

DAVAO CITY — In 2000 and 2001, Davao City was adjudged the country's "Most Child-Friendly City" by the National Council for the Welfare of Children, a government body under the Office of the President.

This year, however, Davao failed to get the recognition because of what local officials here have dismissed as negative noises coming from child-rights groups.

The NGOs retort that they had found it ironic that a city that tolerates the killing of minors as part of a brutal campaign against crime would be considered "child-friendly" at all.

Moreover, says Mae Templa, a social worker who is also with Karapatan's Task Force for Women and Children, public discussion of killings have also "glossed over the real story of the children, why they are in the streets in the first place."

The Davao City Local Development Plan for Children (2003-2007) says that in 2000, Davao had 1,505 street children. This figure more than doubled the following year to 3,213. According to the child-rights group Tambayan, most of the city's street children belong to gangs, of which there are now some 150.

These gangs have become the bane of the city, say the police, who blame such groups for the various crimes committed by juveniles. But the killings of juvenile offenders have not deterred more young people from engaging in crime. The city's plan for children says that the number of minors in conflict with the law increased by 18 percent between 2000 and 2001.

The Women and Children Division of the Davao City Police also says that between January and September this year, 749 minors committed crimes, with theft topping the number of cases at 285. The police say the juvenile crimes constitute a majority of the crimes committed overall during that period.

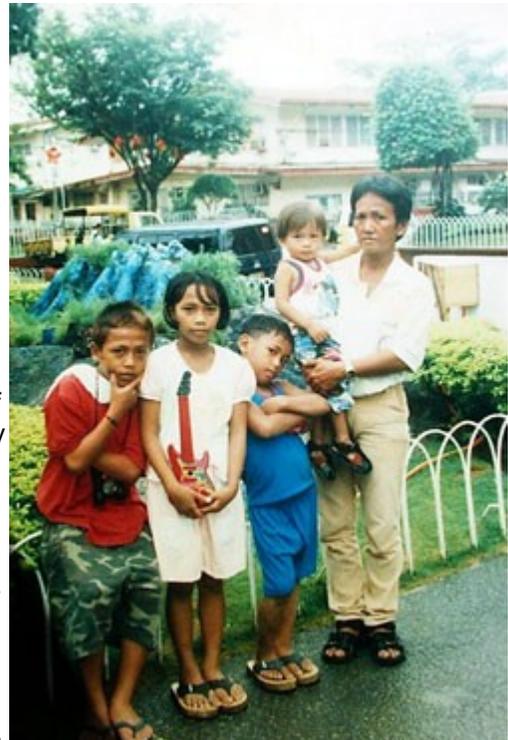
Child-rights advocates like Templa, though, argue that in the case of these youths' involvement in crime, they are as much the victims. "They are for example used as drug couriers and, in a way, the community is involved in that," says Templa. She adds that oftentimes, violence is just the youth gang's reaction to society's neglect. "They are," she says, "pushed to the periphery."

Tambayan program officer Pilgrim Guasa agrees, saying, "Poverty pushed them to the streets, where they are vulnerable to criminal activities, like drug use. For sure, these children are not the ones running the drug business. For one thing, they don't have the capital to do it. So they are in fact being used because they do not have options and the necessary skills to venture outside the streets."

According to a study done in November 2000 jointly by Tambayan, Save the Children-UK, Caritas, the Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), most gang members belong to urban-poor families, and 81 percent of them are out of school due to poverty.

The study showed that 90 percent of respondents who were minors in conflict with the law had experienced abuse at home. The children also said they joined gangs because this is where they find "happiness," and their gangmates are more likely to listen to them and understand them.

"Joining gangs is a means of support," confirms Templa. She explains that because the structures of mainstream society including youth groups like the Sangguniang Kabataan do not absorb these children, they form their own groups. Unfortunately, she says, in cities like Davao, they usually end up being called thugs and labeled as society's problems. Says Templa: "They have become the scapegoat for the community's troubles. That's very unfortunate."



Kabataan Consortium executive director Bernie Mondragon says these youths simply lack the opportunities in life. For example, he says, if they cannot find wholesome entertainment at home, they would naturally gravitate to the outside world.

“I tried my best to keep my children here, in this house,” says Clarita Alia, the 48-year-old mother of three teenage gang members who were casualties in Davao City’s war against crime. Nanay Clarita Alia lives in a tiny, cramped shack in the middle of Bankerohan, the largest public market here.

Since her husband Cornelio left the family in 1996, *Nanay* Clarita has been forced to work double time. For a fee, she hauls vegetables using a wooden cart she rents for P10 a day from the market’s tambakan to the stores that sell these. Her day often starts as early as 2 a.m.

Nanay Clarita had eight children, six by Cornelio, one by a previous lover and another one she adopted. Tending to the children in such a chaotic neighborhood proved to be a problem. And no matter what she did, the streets would beckon to the children. “I once bought a television set so they would not be tempted to go out to the streets,” she says. The tactic worked, but after money problems forced *Nanay* Clarita to pawn the TV, so the children went back to the streets.

Richard, the second of the Alia children, had been an excellent dancer. “He dreamed of someday being part of a dance group,” *Nanay* Clarita recalls. But dancing was not a good enough diversion for Richard to stay off the streets. He managed to finish Grade 4 and soon joined the aptly named Notorious Gang.

Richard had had numerous run-ins with the law. In 2000, he was accused of stabbing another minor; he spent two months in jail for that. The next year, he was shot and wounded allegedly by the nephew of a traffic aide. The shooting was apparently an act of vengeance by the nephew, who was earlier manhandled by Richard’s younger brother, Bobby. “Richard vowed to exact revenge against those who shot him,” *Nanay* Clarita says. But he never got around doing that and was killed on July 17, 2001.

Christopher was jailed in 1997 for rugby use, when he was barely 12 years old. He was sent twice to a rehabilitation center. The first time, in 2000, he escaped. Later, he ended up in jail and was released in July 2001. On October 20, 2001, Christopher became the second Alia boy to be knifed to death.

Bobby had also been jailed, but his charge was illegal possession of a deadly weapon. Like Christopher, he had been placed in the rehabilitation center, from which he escaped after three months. On November 3, 2002, Bobby, too, was stabbed dead.

After Richard’s death, Bobby had joined a gang called Emergency because he was afraid he would be targeted next. Each time they ran into trouble, the Alia brothers would not run to their mother for help. Instead, they would go to their gangmates. “If not these gangs, who would defend them?” asks *Nanay* Clarita. “They told me they could not be alone in the streets because they would be easy prey.”

“I wish we still had that TV set,” she says, crying. Yet one look at the family’s miserable shack dispels any notion that it would be a place teenagers would want to while their time away in, TV or no TV.

The sad truth is that, aside from the sorry physical state of the home, there were other factors why *Nanay* Clarita’s children found the streets far more appealing. Their parents’ relationship, for instance, was one of constant bitterness and rancor. Cornelio, a notorious slacker in Bankerohan, would berate *Nanay* Clarita in front of their children, calling her offensive names and accusing her of having affairs with other men. Cornelio would also physically abuse her and her children. One time, he even nearly strangled the then five-year-old Richard to death.

“My children would tell me that if their father went ahead with his ways, they themselves would kill him,” *Nanay* Clarita says. Their father finally left them, but by then it was already too late to wean them away from the streets and the gangs.

“I tried to make things easier for them, by making sure that they had breakfast before going to school, by buying them notebooks, by washing their uniforms in the middle of the night,” says *Nanay* Clarita. “Each time they flunked, I would re-enroll them but their teachers would tell me I shouldn’t do it any more because I was just wasting my money.”

Soon, even going to school ceased to become an option for the children. It was achievement enough that Richard made it to Grade 4. In comparison, Christopher and Bobby managed to finish only Grade 1.

It only took a while before the Alia boys became notorious in Bankerohan. “Ask any police officer in Bankerohan or the CSU (Civilian Security Unit) and they would say that my children are almost always the first suspects in any crime here,” Nanay Clarita herself says. Neighbors would also accuse the children of being thieves, sometimes physically abusing them.

Obviously, the Alias had not been beneficiaries of the efforts of Bankerohan’s Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), which had been cited for “best practice” by the Unicef in 1999 and 2000.

According to Leon Dominador Fajardo, Unicef area focal officer for Davao City, the selection of Bankerohan’s BCPC for “best practice” had been “mainly an initiative of the city government.” He also explains that the selection was based on the city government’s implementation of education and feeding programs for Davao’s poor children.

Fajardo says that the Unicef is “definitely concerned” about the killing of minors and had informally expressed this concern to the city government and such agencies as the Commission on Human Rights. He adds, “We have urged the city government to squarely face this problem. Children in conflict with the law have rights. We should never lose hope on them.”

When asked if it is perhaps about time that something more than “expressing concern” was done about the situation, Fajardo replies, “We still believe that, as far as policies and programs for children are concerned, Davao City has made a lot of contributions that other cities are using as a model. It is still positive to engage with the city. It would be too hasty and too careless to condemn the (local) government for what is going on.”

In fairness, even child-rights advocates recognize that Davao had the first child welfare code in the country. It was largely because of this code, which focuses on child protection and the establishment of programs for children, that it was twice recognized as the “Most Child-Friendly City” by the national government.

But the code’s good intentions and aims seem to be lost on many local authorities, who continue to ignore the rights of children in trouble with the law, especially if these happen to be poor. In a study commissioned by Save the Children-UK, Karapatan’s Templa found that the city’s juvenile justice system is not responsive to the needs of young offenders. “Of the city’s 180 barangays,” observes Templa, “only one has a special procedure for handling children in conflict with the law.”

In focus group discussions, it also appeared that barangays in the city exert little effort, if at all, to protect these children. Many officials don’t even know there are laws relevant to children, she says.

This, she adds, “indicates very low appreciation of children’s rights. They especially don’t appreciate the rights of children in poverty circumstances.”

“To the rest of the world, these children do not exist,” she says. This makes them vulnerable to abuse, both by police and criminals.”

In fact, Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte insists it is “not true” that minors have been among the victims of extra-judicial killings. “The problem is that I and the NGOs operate on a different paradigm. They are concerned about human rights. I am concerned about crime. And life is never fair. We are not in a perfect world.”

“I don’t buy what the NGOs are saying, that we should address first, for example, poverty,” he said in a recent interview. “If we go into that, into a social study of poverty, we will all be killed. What happens to society if we individualize the situation and in the meantime crime goes unabated?”

Guasa, for her part, says such conditioning by the city’s leaders of the public’s perception of the problem just makes matters worse. These days, Guasa says even some of the mothers of the dead teenagers say their children had their gruesome ends coming. Nanay Clarita may still be grieving for her murdered sons, but Guasa says, “I can never forget one mother who told me that at least she no longer has a problem because her child is dead.”