

PHILIPPINES

ISSUE

The human rights situation in the Philippines.

BACKGROUND

In seeking to arrest and redress human rights violations which had become rampant during the Marcos era, the Government of President Aquino quickly established the Presidential Committee on Human Rights (PCHR) after it came to power in February 1986. The PCHR was intended to fill a monitoring function and to pursue legal action against those accused of human rights abuses or violations. However, it was largely ineffective as it was unable to achieve any convictions during its year and a half of existence. It did encourage a general consciousness on human rights and to begin the process of identifying and pursuing, through legal channels, human rights abuses.

Following the inauguration of the new Congress last July, the PCHR was succeeded by the Commission on Human Rights which had been enshrined in the new Constitution as an independent legal institution. Unfortunately, the Commission has become involved in internal bickering which is likely to delay effective action. The acting Chairman has already attracted criticism as to her suitability for and conduct in this position. One of the new Commissioners, Abelardo Aportadera, visited Canada last November for very useful consultations and an exchange of views. We expect that once the Commissioners and the permanent Chairman start to function as an institution then the Commission will begin to address those issues and continue the process initiated by its predecessor.

Human rights abuses have not significantly declined under the Aquino government and may in fact be on the increase. It is clear that abuses and violations remain a very serious problem in the Philippines, largely because of a climate of inadequate civil order. Some units of the military and vigilante groups have been responsible for many abuses. These targets have included alleged criminals and leading figures among student groups, unions and academics.

The Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, an NGO group, reported a number of deaths and woundings attributed to the military in the first quarter of 1987. With such abuses and violations continuing to occur, public confidence in the government's ability to protect human rights and to control the excesses of the military has weakened. Recent prominent