

THE PHILIPPINES

ISSUE

The human rights record of the Philippines has improved dramatically in recent years. While problems remain, significant improvements in military and police discipline and in the judicial system are taking place.

BACKGROUND

The Philippines Government has made honest and concerted efforts to deal with human rights abuses by officials. It has run a public campaign to remove human rights violators, criminals and corrupt officers from the military and police. Two thousand police officers were fired for abuses by the end of 1994. The anti-subversion law, which had served to cover many abuses, was also repealed in 1994. In 1995, the Commission on Human Rights began a programme of human rights courses for the military and police. These courses could become mandatory training if proposed Congressional legislation is passed.

There is still room for improvement. The Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR), an independent body mandated by the constitution to promote and protect human rights, reported that law enforcement agencies remain the main perpetrators of human rights abuses. Nearly half of the 478 cases filed with the CHR during the first six months of 1996, implicated the Philippine National Police (PNP) (166) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) (61). Murder, homicide, and extra-judicial executions were the most widespread violations, while instances of arrest and detention remained problematic.

Another area being addressed by the government is child sex exploitation. The Philippines has one of the highest rates of child sex exploitation in the world. There are between 60,000 and 100,000 child prostitutes in the Philippines of whom 35% are street children. To address this problem, the Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) announced in September 1996 a five-year plan to combat child sexual abuse and other forms of child exploitation through a public awareness campaign. By working closely with the Department of Justice, the DSWD has already obtained convictions in several child abuse/exploitation cases.

According to PNP statistics, overall violence against women and children increased in the last year. Reported rapes increased from 1167 cases in 1995 to 1194 as of June 1996.

One of the most encouraging events of 1996 was the signing of the Mindanao Peace Accord between the Philippines government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). This agreement aims to correct decades of neglect of the Muslim Filipinos in Southern Mindanao.

There is complete exercise of media freedom, including direct criticism of the President, with censorship being a thing of the past. NGOs, labour unions, and special interest groups are able to lobby freely for reforms throughout the Philippines. Philippine women play a more active role in politics and economics than in most other Asian nations.