

INQUIRER HEADLINES - NATION

Come back, testify, CHR tells Fil-Am activist

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MANILA, Philippines—The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) Monday urged Filipino-American activist Melissa Roxas to return to the Philippines, saying a recent inspection of a military camp tended to validate her physical description of the place where she was tortured in May.

CHR Chair Leila de Lima said she and two other CHR commissioners and investigators went to Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija on June 10 for a “surprise inspection” of the Army camp to “validate certain allegations.”

“Melissa said that she heard sounds and noises of planes, gunfire, and hammering within a certain perimeter. At Fort Magsaysay, we saw an airstrip, a building that was being constructed and firing ranges also within a certain perimeter,” De Lima said.

In her affidavit, Roxas said that she was blindfolded most of the time and that in the two days she spent in a jail cell, she heard construction activities, gun firing “as though in a firing range,” and planes taking off and landing.

She also heard goats bleating.

Roxas, 31, a member of the US chapter of the militant group Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), has accused the military of carrying out her abduction. The military denies abducting and torturing her.

She was visiting the country for an “exposure program” when she was reported missing in La Paz, Tarlac, on May 19. She returned to her home in Tarlac on May 26. Roxas quietly returned to the United States.

At an emotional press conference in Los Angeles, California, on Sunday morning (Manila time), Roxas said that her tormentors had tried to suffocate her by pulling plastic bags over her head. It was the first time she spoke about her abduction and torture in a public forum.

Damages, complaint

Arnedo Valera, Roxas’ lawyer in the United States, said his client would seek damages in a US federal court against the Philippine government.

Valera said his group would also file a complaint before the US Department of State and the United Nations

De Lima said that the CHR’s initial findings, based on interviews, had established that an abduction of three people—Roxas and her companions Edward Jandoc and Juanito Carabeo—took place on May 19 in La Paz, Tarlac, allegedly by a group of armed men.

“The torture allegation is something we’re looking into,” she said.

Roxas, Jandoc and Carabeo resurfaced one after the other, starting with the Fil-Am activist on May 25.

The CHR chair said the commission had already sent word to Roxas that it would like her to testify at the CHR investigation of her case.

De Lima “advised” the military to “desist from making a blanket denial of the reported abduction and torture” of Roxas.

Instead, she said, the military ought to conduct an “earnest, honest to goodness thorough probe” of the allegation.

Preposterous

De Lima described as “preposterous” the government claim that Roxas’ abduction was “stage-managed” because the latter had given a detailed account of the incident.

She expressed hope that aside from Roxas, Carabeo would also come out to speak to the CHR.

Carabeo, however, has been tagged as a member of the communist New People's Army with a string of warrants of arrest, De Lima said.

Guided tour

De Lima, along with CHR Commissioners Norberto de Jesus and Manuel Mamauag and other CHR investigators, went to Fort Magsaysay on June 10 and had a "guided tour" of the Army camp that left them "very curious."

In an earlier interview, De Lima said that while it was "still premature to conclude" that Roxas was held at Fort Magsaysay, there were structures in one area that "fit" her description of the place where she said she was held for six days.

De Lima said that in particular, the airstrip, several firing ranges and the building under construction within the perimeter the CHR team surveyed were "important" in the investigation.

"It all fits. That makes us very curious. It would really require follow-up," she said.

De Lima said the surprise visit at the Army camp was meant to "validate or verify certain facts alleged by the Roxas affidavit... the setup, the environmental circumstances, the noises and sounds Melissa observed when in captivity."

Perimeter

It was the reason the team zeroed in on just the perimeter of the 48,000-hectare military camp that included the airstrip, firing ranges and where a clubhouse was being built.

De Lima said the CHR team was made to wait for 40 minutes outside the camp's gate before being given clearance to enter and was later given a "guided tour" by officials along the perimeter the team chose to inspect.

"They (military) insist that our visitorial powers should not be absolute and should have prior coordination or notice," the CHR chief said.

But De Lima said the CHR visitorial powers, especially in an effort to find missing persons, were "non-negotiable."

Justice system on trial

Roxas' plan to sue the Philippine government for alleged abduction and torture will put the country's criminal justice system itself on trial, Sen. Francis Pangilinan said Monday in a statement.

Sen. Loren Legarda said Roxas' bold move to publicly recount her ordeal and seek legal redress provided a human face to reports, both local and international, of rampant violations of human rights in the country.

CA hearing on writ

At the Court of Appeals, magistrates hearing Roxas' petition for writ of amparo Monday took exception to her continued absence in the hearings even as she gave a news conference in Los Angeles on Sunday.

The writ of amparo is a special legal instrument issued by the Supreme Court to protect people whose rights have been violated by government activities or acts of omission.

Associate Justice Noel Tijam, chair of the Court of Appeals Special 16th Division, said Roxas' presence in the proceedings was important because she alone could provide details of her alleged abduction and torture.

The division set the next hearing on July 24 "on the condition that if the petitioner will be unable to appear, (the court) will send this case to the archives."

Roxas' lawyer Rex Fernandez indicated to the court that his client would be present at the next hearing. He said Roxas was scheduled to arrive in the country in the third or fourth week of July. ***With reports from Michael Lim Ubac and Norman Bordadora***, ©2009 www.inquirer.net all rights reserved