



JULY 19, 2015 | FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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ONE HURT IN FRUSTRATED EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLING OF SUGAR WORKERS IN NEGROS

BACOLOD CITY -- A farmer was wounded in an ambush allegedly perpetrated by goons of a local landlord in Salvador Benedicto town, Negros Occidental last Friday, July 17.

Reports received by the national agriworkers federation Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura (UMA) stated that the victim, Ronel Bariga, was aboard a jeepney when two armed assailants in bonnets peppered the vehicle with caliber 9mm bullets. The driver, Ariel Ceballos, was left unharmed.

The attack left the jeepney with seven (7) bullet holes, grazing Bariga in the right side of his body while hitting only Ceballos's shirt. The incident happened at around 3:00 pm of July 17, while the victims were on their way to Barangay Igmaya-an to gather wood in a property sold by ex-Mayor Nehemias de la Cruz to notorious landlord Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco.

The National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW), UMA's local affiliate in Negros, strongly condemned the attempted extra-judicial killing (EJK). UMA and NFSW believe that its local coordinator in Salvador Benedicto town, Alexander Ceballos, Ariel's father and brother-in-law of Bariga, could be the original target of the said ambush allegedly perpetrated by goons of former Salvador Benedicto town mayor Nehemias de la Cruz.

According to UMA Acting Chairperson John Milton Lozande, sugar workers engaged in NFSW's land cultivation campaign are constant targets of threats, intimidation and violent attacks by landlords with private armies and in cahoots with armed state forces.

"Alexander Ceballos, who actively leads the land cultivation campaign in Barangay Igmaya-an, has been receiving death threats from ex-Mayor dela Cruz's camp. Dela Cruz is behind landgrabbing attempts involving a 25-hectare area made productive through the efforts of around 50 members of NFSW since 2013. The area is now planted to rice, corn, cassava, and bananas," Lozande said. Lozande is also the secretary-general of NFSW.

On June 16, 2015, Jigger Costan, a bodyguard of dela Cruz threatened to kill Alexander and 11 other sugar workers. A few days before the incident, on July 14, Alexander and Ariel Ceballos received yet another threat from JR dela Cruz, the ex-Mayor's son and active Sangguniang Bayan official. In a confrontation at the Bacolod office of the Provincial Agrarian Reform Office (PARO), the younger dela Cruz arrogantly told NFSW chairperson Rolando O. Rillo that they would file charges against Alexander and Ariel and vowed to seize NFSW's land cultivation areas "no matter what." PARO head Emily Vergara was present during the confrontation.

The disputed property used to be under the care of the late Eusebio Ginson, who acquired a free patent from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) but failed to develop the property continuously. De la Cruz, meanwhile, is said to have accumulated through intimidation, killings and illegal means, around 771 hectares of land seized from peasants during his and his family's reign as local officials.

Lozande urged authorities to investigate and prosecute de la Cruz and his minions and to end the reign of terror inflicted upon farm workers and peasants in Salvador Benedicto. "Hundreds, even tens of thousands of hectares acquired by landlords like dela Cruz through violence and intimidation reflect the bogus land reform policy of the landlord President BS Aquino. The attempt to kill farmers in Salvador Benedicto is testament to the dismal failure of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), especially in Negros Occidental and Negros island, where landlordism still holds sway," Lozande said.

Lozande added: "Land cultivation is not a crime. Land reform must provide land to the tiller. Aquino must be held accountable for bogus land reform and grave human rights violations against peasants in last State of the Nation Address (SONA) on July 27."

Aside from investigations on the incident, UMA and NFSW also urge Congress to immediately pass House Bill 252 or the Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill (GARB). ###



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Factsheet

1 HURT IN FRUSTRATED EXTRA JUDICIAL KILLING OF SUGAR WORKERS IN NEGROS

Violation/s:

Physical Injuries, Frustrated Extra-Judicial Killing

Victim/s:

1. **ARIEL CEBALLOS** (unharmed) - son of Alexander Ceballos who is the local National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW) coordinator in Salvador Benedicto town
2. **RONEL BARIGA** - companion of Ariel, brother-in-law of Alexander Ceballos, grazed by 9mm caliber bullet in upper right part of body

Suspected Perpetrators:

Two (2) armed assailants on foot and in bonnets believed to be men of ex-Mayor Nehemias dela Cruz, who is allied with Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, Jr.

Date and Place of Incident:

July 17, 2015, around 3:00 pm
Barangay Igmaya-an, Salvador Benedicto, Negros Occidental

Incident:

Around 3:00 pm of July 17, Ariel Ceballos, driving a jeepney, with companion Ronel Bariga, were headed to barangay Igmaya-an, to gather wood. The two were given prior permission by employees of Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco.

On the way to the site, they were spotted by persons identified to be men of Salvador Benedicto ex-Mayor Nehemias Dela Cruz. The assailants who were on foot and in bonnets fired at the jeepney using 9mm caliber pistols, hurting Ronel who was grazed by a bullet in the upper part of his body. The jeepney bore seven (7) bullet holes due to the attack. Ariel was left unharmed. Victims believe that Ariel was targeted because the assailants mistook him to be his father, Alexander Ceballos, the local coordinator of the National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW) in Salvador Benedicto town. Alexander is one of the leaders of the local land cultivation campaign in the area and in particular on 25 hectares of land coveted by the ex-Mayor.

NFSW is the local affiliate of the Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura (UMA) in Negros island.

Dela Cruz is behind landgrabbing attempts involving the 25-hectare area made productive through the efforts of around 50 members of NFSW since 2013. The area is now planted to rice, corn, cassava, and bananas. Alexander Ceballos, who actively leads the land cultivation campaign in Barangay Igmaya-an, has been receiving death threats from ex-Mayor dela Cruz's camp. On June 16, 2015, Jigger Costan, a bodyguard of dela Cruz threatened to kill Alexander and 11 other sugar workers. A few days before the incident, on July 14, Alexander and Ariel Ceballos received yet another threat from JR dela Cruz, the ex-Mayor's son and active Sangguniang Bayan official. In a confrontation at the Bacolod office of the Provincial Agrarian Reform Office (PARO), the younger dela Cruz arrogantly told NFSW chairperson Rolando O. Rillo that they would file charges against Alexander and Ariel and vowed to seize NFSW's land cultivation areas "no matter what." PARO head Emily Vergara was present during the confrontation.

The disputed property used to be under the care of the late Eusebio Ginson, who acquired a free patent from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) but failed to develop the property continuously.

De la Cruz is said to have accumulated through intimidation, killings and other illegal means, around 771 hectares of land seized from peasants during his and his family's reign as local officials. Previous killings of peasants allegedly perpetrated by goons of ex-Mayor dela Cruz remain unresolved up to the present. ##