NEGROS RAIDS: REVIEW ACTS OF QC JUDGE, SC ASKED

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The Supreme Court must step in and review the actions of judges who may be using arrest and search warrants as tools for political harassment, party list group Bayan Muna said on Saturday as it assailed last week's arrest of 57 activists in Negros Occidental.

Bayan Muna chair Neri Colmenares particularly challenged the Quezon City judge who issued the search warrants on the offices of progressive groups in Bacolod and Escalante to be transparent and disclose the records that were used as bases for the warrants.

"We are calling on the Supreme Court, especially Chief Justice (Diosdado) Peralta, to review this act of the Quezon City [Regional Trial Court] judge, and for the Supreme Court to provide mechanisms to discipline judges who abuse legal processes and merely accede to baseless applications for search warrant by state forces," he said in a statement.

On Thursday and Friday, joint teams from the Philippine National Police and the Philippine Army arrested 57 activists following raids on the offices of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), Kilusang Mayo Uno, Anakpawis, Gabriela, and National Federation of Sugar Workers.

'Rebel warriors'

The arrested persons included 15 minors tagged by the military as "rebel warriors." They were later turned over to the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

Two other women were arrested in another operation in Escalante on Friday for alleged illegal possession of firearms.

Army officials said the arrests were carried out by virtue of warrants issued by Executive Judge Cecilyn Burgos-villavert of Quezon City Regional Trial Court Branch 89.

Colmenares said the PNP has "a lot of explaining to do" over apparent irregularities in the application and implementation of warrants against "legitimate" activist groups.

He challenged Villavert to make public the "special docket book" as required by a Supreme Court directive.

"It appears that the issuance of the warrants was without basis and only meant to harass progressive groups in Negros," Colmenares said.

Quezon City to Bacolod

Bayan Muna Rep. Carlos Isagani Zarate questioned why a Quezon City court issued the warrants against activists in Bacolod City.

"In the first place, why was the warrant requested in [Quezon City] when it will be served in Negros? Did the PNP [officer in charge] endorse it?" asked Zarate, a human rights lawyer.

"Otherwise, she would be violating the rules for issuing the warrant," he said.

Human trafficking

At a press conference in Bacolod City on Saturday, military officials said they might file charges of qualified human trafficking against the arrested activists, apart from the original cases of illegal possession of firearms that provided the basis for the search warrants.

Presented to the reporters were a laundrywoman and a tricycle driver from La Carlota City, about 45 kilometers south of Bacolod, who said they were surprised to learn that their respective daughters were among those arrested.

The two claimed that their children had only told them that they had joined a cultural group and that they didn't know that they were being trained to become "child warriors."

The laundrywoman said her daughter was a Grade 7 student who had dropped out of school after doing poorly in her studies. The girl would not come home for several weeks and often snarled back when asked where she had been, the mother said.

"She seemed to have changed and has become disrespectful," she added.

Last week, she said, her daughter told her that she was joining a contest. Later, a group of soldiers went to the mother's house in La Carlota to ask her if she knew where her daughter was.

When shown a photo of her daughter, the mother was surprised to learn that she had been arrested. She cried when she was finally reunited with her daughter on Saturday.

"I am thankful that what they have been doing has been [stopped]," she said.

'Part of training'

The tricycle driver also went to Bacolod to see his 17-year-old stepdaughter, who he said left home last week to train for a cultural dance presentation.

On Friday night, he learned that she was in police custody, prompting him to rush to Bacolod to bring her home.

Capt. Cenon Pancito, public affairs officer of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, said the military was getting the statements of these parents for the possible filing of charges of qualified human trafficking against the arrested activists.

Some of the arrested persons who were initially listed as minors turned out to be of legal age, he said.

"It is part of their training to give false names and to claim they are minors to avoid detention," Pancito said.