

# The Igorot Of The Cordillera

*Defending the Ancestral Domain in the Philippines.*

William F. Claver

Chairperson

Cordillera Peoples' Alliance

There are in the Philippines today about 7 million indigenous peoples, the bulk of whom are located in Mindanao. They consist of the Muslims and other Tribal Filipinos. In the North, particularly in the Cordillera range of mountains, live the Igorots numbering some eight hundred thousand (800,000) people. It is the Igorots of the Cordilleras in Northern Philippines to which I belong.

During more than 300 years of Spanish domination, the Igorots of the Cordilleras, like their Muslim brothers and other Tribal Filipinos in the South, have never been conquered nor effectively subjugated; neither had they been Christianized unlike the lowland Filipinos. The Igorots, at the end of the last century, kept their lands, their culture, their heritage and their identity. Today, these same people, the Igorots, stand at the threshold of their history of losing their lands, their culture, and their identity at the hands of the Philippine government. Consider these developments,

The Cordillera abounds in vast mineral and other natural resources like forests and rivers. And, although we live in one compact area, in creating the Old

Mountain Province, large segments of the population were parceled out to other lowland communities and provinces. When President Ferdinand Marcos came to power, one of his first official acts was to partition the Mountain Province into four Provinces in 1966. Again, when martial law was declared in 1972, he further bifurcated us by assigning two provinces in Region I and two provinces in Region II.

Through the years, various laws, Presidential Decrees and other executive issuances have set aside our Ancestral lands and the Marcos regime has declared them *public domain* and under the executive control of the Philippine President. Under these laws, all the Igorots and other indigenous people living in mountain areas in the Philippines were stripped of their Ancestral territories and made *squatters* in their own lands. In consequence, our ancestral territories had been opened as areas of interest for mining, logging; and just recently, President Marcos decreed the building of dams over our streams and rivers.

And how did the people respond?

Our people protested. One such organized protest took the form of passionate opposition to the World Bank financed Chico Dams. In the face of our peoples' opposition, the President suspended further prosecution of the dams' construction. Since then, with a more aware Igorot, they also opposed the coming in of big logging conglomerates and are now in the process of questioning many mining exploitation and other activities.

And the net effect?

The government uses force as it is its predilection to employ force to put into effect the Philippine government's destructive policies of 'development'. Military abuses and repressions against our people followed. Recent years have seen an unprecedented rise

in human rights violations and violence in the Cordillera. Implicated in countless cases of violence are Philippine state military and paramilitary operatives. Atrocities perpetrated by them against members of the civilian population have usually occurred in connection with state counter-insurgency activities. However, cases have been reported which are not linked with political repression, but which are rather manifestations of plain military abusiveness. Military atrocities reported by residents of barrios and town centers in the Cordillera provinces of Abra, Apayao, Benguet including Baguio, Iligao, Kalinga, and Mountain Province are many. Similar reports of violence against the residents of Cordillera boundary areas (Cagayan, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Isabela, and Nueva Vizcaya) have been recorded by various human rights organizations.

In the Cordillera we try to differentiate between types of killing. *Salvaging* is a term we use to identify cases of political execution. *Murder* refers to killing without any apparent political motivation.

We also try to differentiate between forms of physical abuse. *Torture* is a term we use to identify cases of severe physical punishment linked with arrest, detention, or interrogation. *Maltreatment* involves less severe physical punishment. *Manhandling* refers to physical abuse without the elements of arrest, detention, or interrogation.

We define *illegal arrest* as arrest without warrant, *illegal detention* refers to cases in which the military holds a person in custody at least overnight without any formal charges filed, and *illegal interrogation* is interrogation without benefit of counsel.

*Coercion* is a term which has come to have several applications depending on a specific case. There have been cases involving forced recruitment to the Philippine Civilian Home Defense Front (CHDF) which we call

coercion. There have been incidents where barrio folk are forced to take oaths of allegiance to the state. And there have been instances when civilians are forced to perform tasks for the military.

There have been many cases of physical and socio-economic dislocation. Evacuation refers to cases of, say, families fleeing their residences because of fear evoked by the militarized situation. Hamletting refers to forcible reconcentration of communities into places where these communities' activities can be better monitored or limited by the military. By imposition of hamletting conditions, we refer to cases in which actual reconcentration does not occur, but close monitoring or limitation of the communities' activities takes place.

Yes, the Philippine military came to the Cordilleras, into our homes, vales and dales, in the name of *development*, and national security. But to the Igorots, they came to protect our exploiters as it was evident that their mission was to stifle dissent and emasculate the growing consciousness of the Igorots as well as break-up all militant pressure groups. The military indulged in all forms of harassments, from hamletting, enforcement of various restrictions, arrests, indiscriminate searches of our abode without warrants, detention, torture, threats, murder and salvaging.

For my part, owing to my activities as a lawyer of political detainees, as a human rights worker and as Chairperson of the Cordillera Peoples' Alliance, no less than three known attempts had been planned on my life by elements of the military, aside from receiving several death threats beamed through the years. We have two lawyers in the Cordillera who have been detained to these days on orders of President Marcos for having taken the gudgeons of indigenous cordillera people.

Now, because of common concern, identity and shared experiences as victims of oppression and other human

rights violations, the Igorots formed the Cordillera Peoples' Alliance in June, 1984. From an initial membership of twenty-seven organizations, it has grown to fifty-six peoples' organizations. In forging the Alliance, they came to identify their problems and the primary prescription for success was the attainment of unity.

And so, some months after its founding, the Alliance supported a Bill proposed in the Philippine National Assembly calling for the regionalization of the Cordilleras. This Bill concedes nothing except reuniting the Cordillera Provinces of Benguet and Mountain Province from Region I, and the Provinces of Kalinga-apayao and Ifugao from Region II into one region. This regionalization set-up is merely for administrative economic planning and does not grant any substantive content for genuine regional autonomy. Our Alliance supported the proposal only as an initial step towards a longer term alternative program for a true autonomous government.

Despite the overwhelming enthusiasm and support for this step towards unification as expressed in voluminous petitions and mass demonstrations, the Philippine government shelved the proposal. It became crystal clear for all that the government clings to its policy of continuing artificial division of the Cordilleras.

The Igorots of the Cordilleras do now realize that it is to the point of unreasoning to expect that the Philippine government will concede their unification, much less would it generously recognize their rights to their Ancestral Domain. Soon, then, did they realize that in their fight for recognition, the same struggle proceeds from their quest for self-determination, the attainment of which will not be given on a silver

platter. But, only by waging a well programmed and organized plan, sustained through the peoples' assertion of their rights to self-determination could the Igorot dream of winning back their homelands be a reality. Thus, the Cordillera Peoples' Alliance came out with an alternative program, broadly stated to the Philippine government as follows:

**In the Political Field:** The Igorot demand for a Cordillera Autonomous Region which shall mean self-government by and for the Cordillera people, equality without discrimination with the rest of the Filipino people, and political unity within the National framework.

**In the Economic Field:** The Igorots demand their rights to their Ancestral Domain, to the disposition, utilization, and management of all natural resources found within their domain.

**In the Cultural Field:** The demand of the Igorots is the right to cultural self-determination, institutional rectification of discriminatory practices, the prohibition of vulgarization and commercialization of indigenous culture, respect for indigenous culture and the promotion of a progressive Igorot consciousness.

These demands are the basic and minimum requirements for our survival. We talk of survival because if we view the trends in the Philippines today, it does not take an expert to say that things will get worse in the Cordillera as it already did happen in Mindanao where vast Tribal lands had been taken and converted into plantations for bananas, sugar, coconut, pineapple and palm oil, not to say of the more than

fifty incidents of massacres committed upon the Muslims, whole displacement of population numbering 1,300,000 persons and the flight of more than 500,000 Muslims to Sabah and other places. Given the unmanageable foreign debts incurred, the chaotic bungling of the economy and the Regime's political bankruptcy, the Philippine government policy of development at all cost — *Damn the people if they are on the way* — will persist. These policies call for massive industrialization, export of dollar earning materials like minerals and logs as well as the search for oil substitutes through construction of dams and geothermal infrastructures ... all these kind of development means land — lands to be stripped bare of its minerals; lands, forestal in nature, shorn and rendered bald by indiscriminate logging, lands devastated by mining wastes and pollution, lands eaten up by flooding and inundation due to dams in the drawing board for construction; and all these are found in indigenous lands. All these lands have either been disposed or in the process of being given for exploitation by the Philippine government to other people who are not necessarily Filipinos and to which disposition and exploitation our people have neither given their consent nor will they derive benefits. By Executive fiat, our lands are taken and given away. This is outright landgrabbing of the worst kind.

It is all too apparent that the pressure on indigenous lands, earmarked by government as resource areas, is escalating at a faster pace beyond our traditional forms of containment. Stronger measures must be devised with a sense of urgency if we are to arrest encroachment, violence, dispossession and displacement. These are happening now and if permitted to grow, it will mean the death of our culture and our death as people.

*As we began going to press, the Ferdinand Marcos regime was in the midst of political and military crisis. Despite his efforts to "steal" elections to maintain his dictatorship, it appears that his government will fall and be replaced by the interests and forces supporting the Corason Aquino presidential campaign. While it is clear that Ms. Aquino has won the elections and will likely replace the Marcos regime it is not clear that the new government will radically change its economic and military policies toward indigenous nations. Many of the economic and military officials working in the Marcos government are likely to resume their positions in an Aquino government. The interests of Filipino indigenous nations remain at serious risk.*

*Mr. Claver's article was adapted from his remarks before the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations during its Fourth Session in August 1985.*