

MASSACRE IN LASAK

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BACKGROUND

Barangay Lasak is the last barangay of Columbio, at the border of Sultan Kudarat Province and South Cotabato Province (island of Mindanao, Philippines), approximately 16 km from the Poblacion center of Columbio. The road from Lasak to Poblacion Columbio is usually passable, but from Lasak to Marbel, South Cotabato, it has been re-opened only recently. The large portion of the area is considered forestal land (but already deforested). The original inhabitants were members of the B'laan tribe, but now the majority are Ilonggo migrant settlers.

For the past two decades, this area has experienced repeated evacuations because of conflicts between the government troops and the communist New People's Army. Yet, the majority of the residents have developed the courage to return and to remain, for they have no other place to go for their livelihood. The community, through their GKK (Basic Christian Community) and farmers' organizations, have actively resisted the incursions of the Western Mining Company (from Australia) since the beginning of the 90's up to the present.

There is speculation that the road from Lasak to Marbel was originally constructed specifically for mining activities, and when these were resisted, the road fell into disrepair for several years. Recently, the road construction was resumed, with the presence of the military, allegedly to guard the equipment for the ongoing project. A consultation of the community was called by the Barangay Captain, who informed the people that a military detachment would be established in the higher portion of the barangay in order to secure the construction of the road.

During the consultation, the GKK leader spoke against such a military detachment. He recalled their past experiences of having a military presence in the area, which attracted the attention of armed rebel groups. He further explained that a military detachment was not necessary since conditions there have been generally peaceful and orderly. However, in spite of these arguments, the community was forced to comply, since the Barangay Captain emphasized that this was an order coming from top ranking officials. The residents were formed into groups of ten and compelled to gather the materials for the construction of eight huts for the detachment. Regular military and some CAFGU members (Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units) were deployed in the detachment.

From the last week of October to the first week of November, 2000 the community was also concerned with the situation in Columbio, since they heard of the ongoing armed clashes in other barangays. Some members of the community have the illusion of peace because of the present detachment. Some are uncertain of the situation. However, the massacre of November 12, 2000 has caused panic among the residents. Thus, the GKK of Lasak and the parish of Columbio have requested concerned groups to visit the family and the community of Lasak for further sharing and to look into the root causes of the incident.

Through the initiative of the local organizations, in coordination with the Diocese of Kidapawan, a Fact Finding Team was organized to visit the family and the community where the incident took place.

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ACCOUNT OF THE MASSACRE

The fading voices of Geronimo Eleccion and his only son Richard are the sole witnesses of the incident. The following statement is based upon the testimony of Geronimo before his death.

The victims:

*Luzviminda Eleccion 39 years old; GKK Secretary/Treasurer
Geronimo Eleccion 57 years old; husband of Luzviminda
Richard Eleccion 16 years old; only son of Luzviminda and Geronimo
Gemma Bianzon 21 years old; sister of Luzviminda; GKK catechist
Allan Seroco 34 years old; boyfriend of Gemma; GKK Youth Leader
Renjie Sujede 5 years old; nephew of Luzviminda*

In the early dawn of November 12, 2000, the barking of dogs was heard in the area of Geronimo's residence. At around 3:30 AM, Geronimo woke up and boiled some water for coffee, as was his daily routine. He heard voices downstairs saying, "Maayo, maayo, ablihi kami kay maayo kaming tawo" ("Please open up, we are all good people"), and then someone asked for coffee. Since Geronimo was hesitant to open the door, about 10 armed men forced it open and entered the house. Geronimo prepared coffee for them. While some were still drinking their coffee, others dragged the victims outside to an area about 10 meters from the house. The family felt that the men intended to kill them.

Gemma Bianzon called out to her brother, Boboy, who was staying in another house nearby: "Boy! Palagyo na!" ("Boy, run away!"). Boboy heard the shouts of his sister, followed by gunshots. According to Geronimo, three of them were the first targets (Geronimo, Luzviminda and Gemma, who was holding the child Renjie). Allan and Richard tried to escape but Richard was shot, and Allan returned to Gemma and Luzviminda, hoping to rescue them. However, he too was shot. Dead on the spot were Luzviminda, Gemma, Allan and Renjie.

The armed men thought all of them were dead. Geronimo feigned death while he observed the movements of the group. He saw that there were over 30 armed men surrounding them. Some of them began looting the house of clothes and the cash of the GKK, kept by Luzviminda as Treasurer. The armed men also gathered and set fire to pillows and blankets in the center of the house, intending to burn down the entire structure. When Geronimo saw that the group had left, he struggled to go upstairs, even though seriously wounded in his arms and stomach (his intestines were exposed). In several trips, he managed to fetch about 4 gallons of water and stop the burning. Then he fell under a table, since he could no longer bear the pain of his wounds. Boboy, the brother of Luzviminda and Gemma, together with friend, was the first to arrive at the scene at around 5:30 AM. He held Richard, who was still alive. Richard was asking a merciful death from his Uncle Boboy: "Uncle, please kill me; I cannot stand the pain." He asked his uncle to stretch his fingers and toes. Boboy told him to entrust himself to the Lord. Richard suddenly closed his eyes and breathed his last. Boboy looked for Geronimo, who was inside the house. Together with the GKK leader, he took him to the hospital in Marbel, South Cotabato.

Because of the isolation of Lasak and lack of transportation, he had suffered from his serious wounds for almost 5 hours before he was brought to the hospital. Geronimo underwent a major operation and afterwards was conscious and able to relate the incident. However, because of severe kidney damage, he did not last. He died on Nov. 15, 2000 in the hospital. The family was charged the amount of 50,000 pesos (just over \$1,000), which they cannot raise. The body of Geronimo was released to them only after they gave a land title as warranty for the payment. The governor of Sultan Kudarat has promised to help; the parish of Columbio, the P.I.M.E. Missionaries and the Diocese of Kidapawan have contributed to the hospital expenses, and a solicitation of parishioners throughout the Columbio parish has helped the families to cover

funeral costs.

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WHO IS BEHIND THIS MERCILESS KILLING?

The family cannot trace the motives; according to them, they do not have enemies in the community. They are all innocent civilians. As active leaders and members of their GKK, they performed their responsibilities well. The perpetrators were speaking a mixture of languages (Tribal, Muslim, Ilonggo and Cebuano), but Geronimo identified the accent as belonging primarily to the Tribal B'laan and Muslim languages.

Surprisingly, the family reported that there was no immediate response from any law enforcement agency in Columbio. It is also coincidental that the military detachment which had recently been established in Lasak was withdrawn the day before the incident. Since the victims' bodies were taken to Upper Kadidang, which is part of Marbel, South Cotabato, and Geronimo was taken to Lourdes Hospital in the same locality, the Philippine National Police of Marbel became the investigating agency, basing their investigation on the words of Geronimo and Boboy at the Lourdes Hospital.

According to their official report, the perpetrators are believed to members of the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front - a Muslim rebel group). On November 19, the Barangay Captain of Lasak finally approached the family and proposed an investigation from the Columbio police. The family and the community cry for justice for the victims. They cannot pinpoint anyone, but they believe that the armed group could not do this barbaric act without orders and backers. The community is still looking for evidence in order to determine the identity of the perpetrators and their sponsors. The residents of Lasak desire peace not only for their own community but also for Columbio as a whole. They are expecting a sincere investigation of the case, hoping that the truth will come out soon.

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