

Philippine inquiry into 800 deaths opens

by UPI

DAVAO CITY, Philippines -- Filipino officials Monday began an inquiry into more than 800 unexplained slayings in Davao City since 1998, allegedly the work of a vigilante group.

Commission on Human Rights Chairwoman Leila de Lima said before the inquiry she was concerned about the "growing culture or mentality of public acceptance of executions," the Philippine Daily Inquirer reported Monday.

"This is worse than apathy and indifference," she told the newspaper, noting that some justify the killings by the Davao Death Squad as one way of making the area crime-free.

A total of 814 deaths, including 73 children, have been attributed to the vigilante group since 1998.

The CHR inquiry would attempt to learn the truth about the existence of the death squad and whether local officials failed to stop the killings, she said. It also would try to determine the extent of human rights violations, examine the causes of the killings and study measures to address them.

"There is still a factual issue if the DDS really exists. Some say it's a media creation. Others say it's real, that there is such a group of hired killers," she told the Daily Inquirer. "I am inclined to believe that there is such a group because how can we have cases of mysterious, almost serial, killings."

De Lima said Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte pledged cooperation in the inquiry. However, she noted Duterte has made "disturbing statements" that seem to tolerate, if not outright sanction, the killings. Duterte has denied that the government was behind the group as well as its existence, blaming the deaths on gang wars, illegal drug trade rivalries and grudges, the Daily Inquirer said.

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