

GMA orders AFP, PNP to support CHR probe on unexplained killings

President Arroyo has ordered the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines to cooperate and give their full support to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in its probe of unexplained killings in Davao City.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde welcomed the probe by the CHR, saying it is part of its mandate to investigate cases involving alleged human rights violations.

It was reported that since

1998, a total of 814 deaths attributed to "vigilantes" have been recorded in Davao City, and for the first three months of the year, 40 unexplained killings occurred.

Deputy presidential spokesperson Lorelei Fajardo said the Palace is totally committed to identify perpetrators of killings in Davao City.

A vigilante group known as the Davao Death Squad (DDS) has been reportedly behind the killings.

Its victims were mostly suspected criminals, particularly drug dealers.

At a hearing/inquiry being conducted by the CHR from March 30 to 31 at the Royal Mandaya Hotel, Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte vowed to cooperate with the probe and took full responsibility for the unabated killings.

Apart from the deaths of known criminals, the CHR is also expected to investigate the murders of political activ-

ists and their relatives.

These include the rape and murder of teacher Rebelyn Pitao, daughter of New People's Army commander Leoncio Pitao, alias Commander Parago, in Davao del Norte early this month.

The administration has been criticized for the high incidence of unexplained killings involving political activists and journalists.

Malacañang, however, has denied the involvement of government security forces in

the murders and vowed to punish anyone found engaged in such activities.

"We are here to uncover the truth. It cannot be stated more succinctly — we are here to put a stop to these vigilante-style killings," CHR chair Leila de Lima said in her opening message in yesterday's public hearing conducted with commissioners Ma. Victoria Cardona and Norberto de la Cruz.

De Lima said the probe also seeks to save the "psyche" of

the Davaoeños — "to remove this terrible stigma over their city, to lift the fear for their own rights and lives" over the issue on summary executions that have gone unabated since the 1990s.

Meanwhile, PNP chief Director Jesus Verzosa also pushed for the creation of an inter-agency task force that would look specifically into the killings in Davao City.

— Marvin Sy, Edith Regalado, Katherine Adraneda