

20 DENR workers killed in last 2 years

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MANILA, Philippines—The last two years have been deadly for government forestry workers and environmental advocates.

According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, 20 of its employees, contractual workers and civil society partners have been killed since 2010. The latest death toll occurred just last Friday in Surigao del Sur, the ground zero for illegal logging in the Philippines.

Environment Secretary Ramon Paje identified the latest casualties as Rolando Intas, 57, and Wilner Pelos Colorita, 52, who were both gunned down by an unknown assailant. Paje said they were forest protection officers, who work for a forest cooperative in Lianga, Surigao del Sur.

Caraga Regional Director Nonito Tamayo said the two men worked closely with the DENR. A few days before they were killed, they intercepted and confiscated 1,000 board feet of hardwood lumber that were illegally harvested from their forest land.

“They were killed in the market by a lone unknown assailant. One of them died on the spot, while the other died on arrival at the hospital,” Tamayo said.

Before 2010, there were instances of violence against DENR workers, but they were not as severe nor as brazen. In 2009, one DENR employee was killed while at work and he died because of natural causes, DENR records show. In 2008, six died while on official duty, including a forest ranger gunned down at a checkpoint.

Alyansa Tigil Mina and Kalikasan People’s Network said 17 environmental activists had been killed under the Aquino administration. Since 2001, there had been 58 killings, the groups said.

“If the figures from DENR Secretary Paje are accurate ... that is extremely alarming,” Carlos Conde of Human Rights Watch told the INQUIRER.

“These killings are all the more alarming in the context of the Aquino government’s determined push for more investments in mining. Without the necessary safeguards in place to protect DENR employees and environment advocates, we are afraid that these killings will continue,” he added.

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