

REPORT OF THE FACT-FINDING MISSION MEMBERS ON THE REPORTED ABDUCTION OF TWO YOUNG WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS IN ORION, BATAAN

This fact-finding mission (FFM) was conducted on September 4, 2023 to September 5, 2023 in Orion, Bataan.

Members of the FFM were able to gather the following information regarding the reported abduction:

Jonila Castro, 21 years old, and Jhed Tamano, 22 years old, are both community volunteers of the Alyansa-para sa Pagtatanggol sa Kabuhayan, Paninirahan, at Kalikasan ng Manila Bay (AKAP KA Manila Bay – Alliance for the Defense of Livelihood, Housing, and Environment in Manila Bay), which is a network of fisherfolks, church people, youth, and members of the academe.

Jonila is a community volunteer assisting Jhed in working with the communities along the coastal areas of Bulacan and Bataan. Jhed is a program coordinator of “Turn the Tide, Now!” a newly launched church-community partnership program of AKAP Ka Manila Bay, with Ecumenical Bishops Forum as one of the prime movers.

Since 2022, Jonila had expressed fears of staying in her family home in Plaridel, Bulacan because of incidents pertaining to numerous visits of a man who introduced himself as a soldier who wanted to help Jonila to “clear” her name. He left a number to Jonila’s mother, just in case Jonila is ready to talk to him in person.

Jhed and Jonila were at the coastal barangays of Orion for the last 3 days before they were abducted conducting disaster needs and capacity assessment, in preparation for a possible relief operation after several typhoons and southwest monsoon rains have hit the region and Bataan last July and August.

The last text message of Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro to a colleague was at around 7:03 PM on September 2, 2023.

Around 8:00 PM, information were posted on Facebook by concerned citizens who claimed to have witnessed the abduction of two young women in front of the Orion Water District (Oriwad) office at Manrique St., Barangay Lati, Orion, Bataan, by armed men who were wearing face masks on board a gray Innova vehicle. Another man aboard a motorcycle was also seen and thus alleged to have served as escort of the men in the Innova vehicle.

Several residents in the area witnessed the incident and provided information. They said that the area where the abduction occurred was well-lighted and is a busy street. Eyewitnesses recounted that the Innova vehicle stopped beside the two young women who were then walking, and that four armed men alighted the said vehicle and grabbed the two. Jonila and Jhed struggled from being taken inside the vehicle. One of them managed to run away but was immediately dragged back to the vehicle. The other young woman tried to pry open or climb over the gate of one of the residents, but was also dragged back to the Innova vehicle.

One of the residents said that he wanted to help but one of the armed men purportedly acting as a lookout shouted, “huwag kang makialam, kung ayaw mong madamay...” (do not get in the way, if you don’t want to be involved...).

Residents claimed that screams calling for help “Tulong, tulong” (help, help) were heard at least 10-15 houses away along Manrique St. but they did not act because the abductors are armed. They noted that the gray Innova drove towards the National Road.

The details of the incident, including the make and plate number of the vehicle, was immediately reported to barangay officials. Police personnel from the Philippine National Police - Orion reportedly arrived that night, September 2, in the barangay and entered the Oriwad office.

A member of the community called a colleague of Jhed and Jonila, on or about 10:50 PM September 2, to check on the whereabouts of Jhed and Jonila, fearing that the young women reported to be the victims of abduction are the same young women that their community had hosted.

Jhed and Jonila’s colleagues started contacting the two, but were alarmed when the two had not replied to any of their messages. They thought that the two just probably ran out of battery, so while waiting for their reply they also tried to look for the two by contacting all other possible homes of friends and communities they could have stayed for the night. None of those homes had seen Jhed or Jonila that night or the night thereafter September 2.

On September 4, members of the fact-finding mission accompanied the family of Jonila Castro to the PNP Orion Municipal Police Station, where they intended to file a police blotter report, to inquire on the updates on the police investigation, and to have them receive and accomplish the form entitled “Inquiry into a Reported Disappeared Person’s Whereabouts” as per Republic Act No. 10353 or the anti-enforced disappearance law. Those at the police station at that time refused to make the police blotter report and did not share any update on their own investigation on the manner of abduction, but dwelled upon only on the background of the victims and their organization. They also refused to sign the form as provided for under RA 10353.

The findings of the members of the fact-finding mission are as follows:

1. There is possible involvement of State actors in the abduction of Castro and Tamano. Similar patterns and incidents of abductions and enforced disappearances have been documented, especially under the Marcos Jr. administration, where armed men on vehicles have held captive activists and ordinary citizens whom they perceive to be “enemies of the State.” The prior known incidents of harassment against Castro by someone who introduced himself as a soldier indicate that she is targeted purportedly for her activism. The lack of protection afforded to her since then had made her and Tamano more vulnerable to graver attacks.
2. The two young women environmental defenders were abducted in a violent manner, as witnessed by those in the community. All those interviewed by the FFM team attested that the two women were taken by force. Their continuing disappearance, especially their being held captive by armed men, is a great cause of concern.

3. Under RA 10353, State actors have the duty and obligation to conduct thorough and impartial investigations on cases of enforced disappearances. However, there is an apparent lack of transparency on how they are conducting such investigations, considering the recent statements issued by authorities.

4. There are several questions that should be raised in relation to the police investigation of the incident including the following:

- Were the CCTV footages, including those from the CCTV device of the Orion Water District, duly processed as evidence?
- Why did personnel at the Orion Municipal Police Station refuse to make the police blotter report on Jonila Castro when approached by Castro's mother? Why did they refuse to sign the form as provided for under RA 10353 and to provide updates on their investigation?
- Where are the report on the leads provided by the barangay officials and residents?

The FFM members recommend the following:

1. For the Commission on Human Rights to conduct an independent and thorough investigation on the incident, by conducting unannounced and unrestricted visits or inspections in all places of detention or confinement, including but not limited to police and military camps, safehouses, and detention facilities and by obtaining all reports and updates on the investigation on the incident to the family of Jonila Castro;
2. For the PNP and law enforcement agencies to stop the intimidation against the family of Jonila Castro and human rights organizations supporting efforts to surface the two women;
3. For law enforcement officers to comply with RA 10353 and refrain from intimidating residents of Barangay Lati, where incident happened, from freely giving their statements and testimonies as eyewitnesses to the incident;
4. For the Committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate conduct independent investigations into the incident in aid of their oversight functions on the implementation of RA 10353;
5. For non-governmental/human rights organizations to further conduct independent investigations into the incident, without fear of reprisals including threats and surveillance, and report on updates regarding the incident; and
6. For international human rights watchdogs and rights bodies to support the call for the surfacing of the two women and to ensure their rights and integrity.

Members of the following organizations participated in the fact-finding mission: AKAP KA Manila Bay, Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment, Promotion of Church People's Response, National Council of Churches in the Philippines, KARAPATAN