



BLOOD ON THE STREET: The aftermath of what police said was a shoot-out with three drug suspects beneath MacArthur Bridge in central Manila in June. The three men were pronounced dead on arrival at hospital. **REUTERS/Dondi Tawatao**

Duterte's killer cops

BY CLARE BALDWIN AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

JUNE 29 – DECEMBER 19 MANILA/ QUEZON CITY

Philippine police use hospitals to hide drug killings

BY CLARE BALDWIN AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

JUNE 29 MANILA

The residents of Old Balara hid in their homes when gunfire erupted in their Manila district last September. They didn't see the police operation that killed seven drug suspects that night.

But they witnessed the gory aftermath and it haunts them still.

That night, Herlina Alim said she watched police haul away the men's bodies, leaving trails of blood. "They were dragged down the alley like pigs," she said. Her neighbour Lenlen Magano said she saw three bodies, face down and motionless, piled at the end of the alley while police stood calmly by.

It was at least an hour, according to residents, before the victims were thrown into a truck and taken to hospital in what a police report said was a bid to save their lives. Old Balara's chief, the elected head of the district, told Reuters he was perplexed. They were already dead, Allan Franza said, so why take them to hospital?

An analysis of crime data from two of Metro Manila's five police districts and interviews with doctors, law enforcement officials and victims' families point to one answer: Police were sending corpses to hospitals to destroy evidence at crime scenes and hide the fact that they were executing drug suspects.

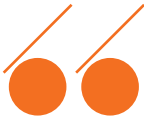
Thousands of people have been killed since President Rodrigo Duterte took office on June 30 last year and declared war on what he called "the drug menace." Among them were the seven victims from Old Balara who were declared dead on arrival at hospital.

A Reuters analysis of police reports covering the first eight months of the drug war reveals hundreds of cases like those in Old Balara. In Quezon City Police District and neighbouring Manila Police District, 301 victims were taken to hospital after police drug operations. Only two survived. The rest were dead on arrival.

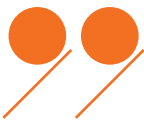
The data also shows a sharp increase in the number of drug suspects declared dead on arrival in these two districts each month. There were 10 cases at the start of the drug war in July 2016, representing 13 percent of police drug shooting deaths. By January 2017, the tally had risen to 51 cases or 85 percent. The totals grew along with international and domestic condemnation of Duterte's campaign.

This increase was no coincidence, said a police commander in Manila, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity. In late 2016, he said, police began sending victims to hospitals to avoid crime scene investigations and media attention that might show they were executing drug suspects. A Reuters investigation last year found that when police opened fire in drug operations, they killed 97 percent of people they shot.

The Manila commander said police



The doctors aren't asking any questions. They only record it: DOA



A police commander in Manila

depended on emergency room doctors being too focused on the patients to care about why they were shot. The doctors “aren’t asking any questions. They only record it: DOA,” he said.

But five doctors told Reuters they were troubled by the rising number of police-related DOAs. Four said many drug suspects brought to hospital had been shot in the head and heart, sometimes at close range – precise and unsurvivable wounds that undermined police claims that suspects were injured during chaotic exchanges of gunfire.

Oscar Albayalde, Metro Manila’s police chief, said he had never heard of officers taking dead suspects to hospital to cover up crime scenes. “We will have that investigated,” he told Reuters. If that investigation showed police were “intentionally moving these dead bodies and bringing them to the hospitals just to alter the evidence, then I think we have to make them explain.”

Duterte’s office declined to expand on Albayalde’s response to Reuters’ questions.

According to police reports about the incidents, suspects shot during operations were “immediately rushed” to hospital. “The most important (thing) is the life of the person,” said Randy Llanderal, a precinct commander in Quezon City. The police reports reviewed by Reuters showed Llanderal had led or joined operations in which 13 drug suspects ended up dead on arrival.

Llanderal said all suspects were shot in self-defence during legitimate operations.

The Manila police commander, a retired senior officer and some doctors believe there is a cover up. Hospitalising drug suspects who have been shot allows police to project a more caring image, said the Manila commander. The retired officer agreed. “It is basically a ploy to make the public believe that the police are mindful of the safety and survival of suspects,” he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The Manila commander said his officers were instructed to shoot at “sensitive areas.” Suspects who survived were shot again to finish them off or smothered with their own clothing, he said.

A Reuters examination of the Old Balara

incident and similar operations also suggests that the purpose of hospital runs was to destroy evidence rather than save lives. Police manhandled gunshot victims and showed no urgency in getting them medical treatment, said three sets of family members and other witnesses.

Removing bodies makes it harder to work out what really happened. “You obliterate the crime scene – the evidence,” said Rizaldy Rivera, an agent at the Philippines’ National Bureau of Investigation who has investigated allegations of police brutality. Police forensic investigators at the scene, said Rivera, must carry out their work on what is effectively a “tampered crime scene.”

Scene of Crime Operatives, or SOCO units as police forensic teams are called, process crime scenes and conduct autopsies. Aurelio Trampe, the police general who oversees SOCO, said police officers haven’t been removing bodies to alter crime scenes. He said they have the discretion to disregard crime-scene investigative procedures “just as long as they could save lives.”

SOCO can still collect evidence from bodies once they reach the hospital, but doesn’t always do so. Instead, said SOCO forensic chief Reynaldo Calaoa, that task falls to a police investigator assigned to the case. That investigator often hails from the same station as the colleagues who killed the suspect.

Such practices can leave the system open to abuse, said Raquel Del Rosario Fortun, an independent forensic scientist and chair of the University of the Philippines Manila pathology department.

“They do the shooting, they do the killing – and they investigate themselves,” she said. “Impunity, that’s what’s happening.”

COLD TO THE TOUCH

Old Balara is part of Quezon City, the largest of the 17 cities and municipalities that make up Metro Manila, and the most populous city in the Philippines.

Old Balara district chief Franza said police insisted his staff of volunteer security guards

bring drug-war casualties from operations to the hospital – even when it was clear they were dead. Because he has assisted the police by transporting casualties, the victims' families have accused him and his staff of complicity in the killings, he said.

In March, Franza decided he had had enough. Keep responding to police calls, he told his staff, but don't take a body to hospital without the go-ahead from SOCO crime scene investigators. "I decided not to take action which I think is not proper," said Franza.

The seven victims from Old Balara arrived at East Avenue Medical Center stacked in a flatbed truck and another vehicle, said Jerome Paez, an attending physician at the emergency room that night. Most had been shot in the head and many also had multiple gunshots in their chests, he said. None were breathing or had a pulse.

"All of them were cold to the touch," said Paez, who has dealt with 21 drug suspects pronounced dead on arrival.

The victims had been refused admission earlier at Quezon City General Hospital's emergency room, a 15-minute drive away, because they were already dead, said district chief Franza. The hospital told Reuters it had no record of receiving patients from Old Balara that night.

The Old Balara bodies were already in the morgue of East Avenue Medical Center by the time the mother of victim Elmer Gayoso arrived. She asked Reuters to withhold her name, saying she feared retribution from the police.

Gayoso had been shot through the head and the heart, she said, and the headshot had destroyed his face. She said her husband identified him by scouring his corpse for familiar childhood scars. The wounds were so grave that she didn't believe that the police took Gayoso to the hospital to save his life.

"That was their pretense," she said, weeping.

The killings also troubled Paez, the ER doctor. "We documented everything, just in case in the future it is needed for investigation," he said.

Even if doctors at East Avenue Medical

Center suspect a new arrival is dead, hospital protocol requires them to try to resuscitate the patient, said Paez. This is costly and wastes time at a big public hospital teeming with patients. In a recent visit by Reuters, old people wearing oxygen masks lay unmoving on gurneys. New patients arrived every few minutes.

Asked about the number of drug suspects arriving dead at hospital, the acting director of the East Avenue Medical Center, Victoria Abesamis, said: "I cannot categorically say that the police are bringing these dead bodies because they want to cover up. I think I will give them the benefit of the doubt."

TRAINED SHOOTER

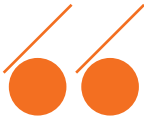
Lawrence Bello and three other doctors at East Avenue Medical Center interviewed by Reuters also expressed unease about handling dead-on-arrival cases from police operations.

Bello said the police would sometimes deliver bodies that were already displaying rigor mortis, which sets in several hours after death. East Avenue would get two or three such bodies per month, he said.

Bello has dealt with 20 cases where suspects were dead on arrival following a police operation, according to Quezon City Police District data. One of them, Bello said, had a single gunshot wound. The bullet had entered below the chin and exited through the top of the head. Bello said he found the injury "quite questionable."

Such an injury is usually associated with victims of suicide or execution, said Homer Venters of Physicians for Human Rights, a group based in New York that investigates mass atrocities. "It is very hard for that to happen when a person isn't fully compliant," he said. Venters didn't examine the body that Bello referred to.

Patel Mayuga, another ER doctor at East Avenue Medical Center, has pronounced 10 victims of police shootings dead on arrival, according to Quezon City Police District data. Suspects who are dead on arrival usually have "clean shots" in the forehead or chest, suggesting



The CHR, given its current capacity constraints, is only able to investigate and document a fraction of all the deaths that have been reported by the media.



Chito Gascon
Chairman of the
Commission on
Human Rights

the killings were intentional, said Mayuga. "If they are shot in the chest or head, there was time for the attacker to prepare," he said.

Many other drug suspects brought to hospitals in Quezon City by police were also shot in the head and heart, often from less than a meter away, four doctors told Reuters.

One January evening, police delivered five bodies in a small jeepney bus to the state-run Novaliches District Hospital in Quezon City. The floor of the jeepney bus was puddled with the victims' blood and excrement, recalled Lawrence Laguno, the ER doctor on duty. According to police, the victims had all pulled guns and opened fire on undercover officers during an anti-drug operation. They missed, and the police returned fire.

"All suspects were seriously injured," said the police report. "Thereafter, wounded suspects were rushed to Novaliches District Hospital for medical treatment but pronounced dead on arrival by attending physician, Dr. Lawrence Laguno."

Laguno told Reuters that all five men had been shot in the head and chest, with almost the same entry and exit wounds – injuries that looked to him both deliberate and impossible to survive. "It's unusual to have the same five patients with almost the same injuries," said the doctor. "It was a trained shooter. They knew what they were doing."

Venters of Physicians for Human Rights said it is "incredibly rare" to sustain a tight grouping of gunshot wounds in a shootout. Venters, a medical doctor, has overseen research and investigations into extrajudicial killings. When bullets enter a body from the same direction and plane, it shows the target wasn't moving, he said. "Either they were surprised and shot, or they were subdued and shot."

Willie Saludaes, acting chairman of the emergency room at East Avenue Medical Center, said doctors didn't follow up on questionable cases, since how patients were killed wasn't their concern. "I'm sorry to sound too cold, but that's the way it is," he said. "I am only concerned about the health of the patient. I'm not doing investigative work."

Nor, it seemed, were others. Saludaes said that state agencies that investigate police killings, such as the Commission on Human Rights or the National Bureau of Investigation, didn't come to interview him. Saludaes also said he was uncomfortable speaking freely and feared losing his job.

Chito Gascon, chairman of the Commission on Human Rights, said that if specific cases were brought to the agency's attention, its investigators should pursue them and secure testimony from doctors. But the Commission was stretched, he added. "The CHR, given its current capacity constraints, is only able to investigate and document a fraction of all the deaths that have been reported by the media," he said.

The National Bureau of Investigation didn't comment.

"THEY WEREN'T BREATHING"


Police say they don't shoot to kill and that saving lives is paramount. But 17 witnesses interviewed by Reuters say their behaviour at crime scenes suggests the opposite.

In September, in a district called Nagkaisang Nayon, precinct commander Llanderal led an operation that added six dead-on-arrival cases to the Quezon City body count. According to a police report, the suspects – five men and a woman – opened fire on undercover officers posing as drug buyers. They missed, and the officers returned fire.

"When the smoke cleared," said the report, "all suspects sustained gunshot wounds on their body. Immediately thereafter, all suspects were rushed to Novaliches District Hospital for medical treatment but (were) pronounced dead on arrival." None of the officers were injured.

Llanderal acknowledged that removing the bodies disturbed the crime scene, but insisted the suspects were alive. "They were still moving. All of them!" he said.

Bereaved relatives and other witnesses told Reuters the bodies were taken to hospital an hour or more after the shooting, and that none of the victims showed signs of life. "They



It's not possible they were alive, we saw them thrown in the back of a truck.



Jocelyn Ceron
Ronaldo Ceron's wife

weren't moving. They weren't breathing," said Feliciano Dela Cruz, the local district chief.

"It's not possible they were alive," said Jocelyn Ceron, 47, whose husband, Ronaldo, was among the dead. "We saw them thrown in the back of a truck."

Ceron said Ronaldo's body had six bullet wounds: three in the chest or torso, one in the leg, and one in each hand. Relatives said the other bodies each bore at least six gunshot wounds. Ceron showed Reuters photos of the crime scene.


Llanderal confirmed that the photos were taken by police investigators and showed the immediate aftermath of his operation. One photo shows a woman lying face down in a blood-smeared alleyway. Others show a tiny room in which five men lie slumped in pools of blood or on the floor; two guns are clearly visible.

Reuters shared the crime scene photos with Fortun, the independent forensic scientist. "Based on the pictures, they are apparently very dead," Fortun said of the six victims.

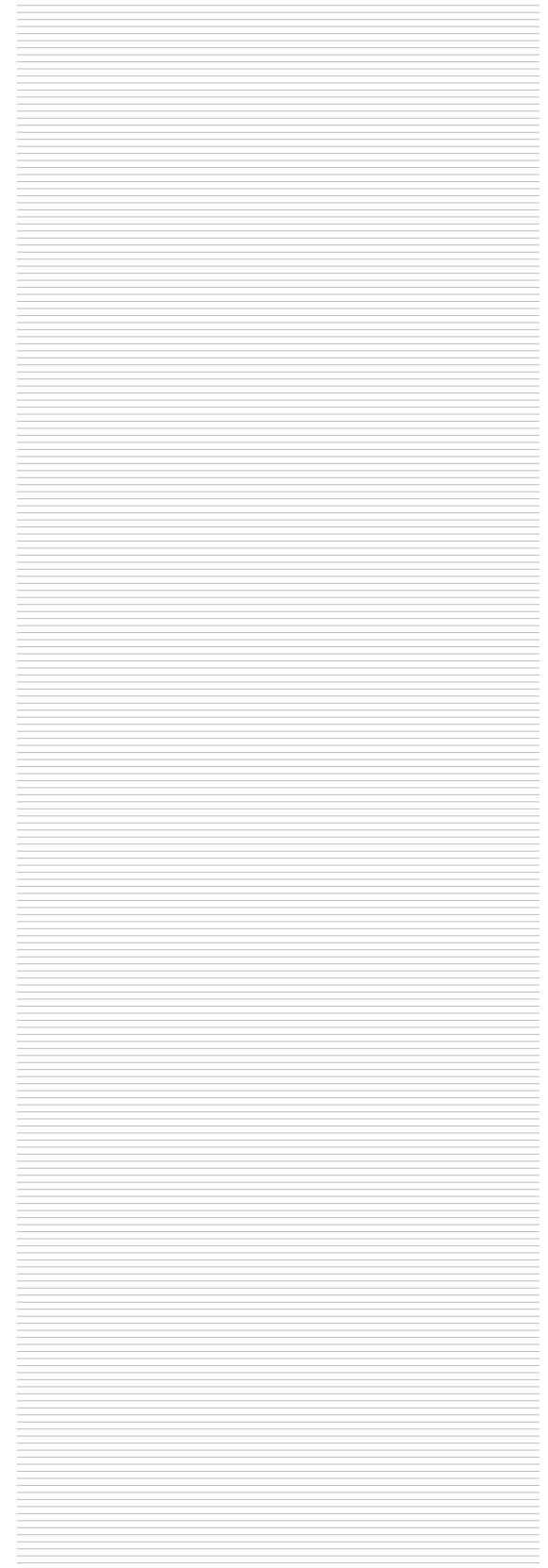
For so many bodies to be crammed into a tiny room "doesn't seem consistent" with police claims that the suspects were shot while fleeing during a gun battle, she added.

Relatives of Ronaldo Ceron believe the police executed him and others in cold blood. A neighbour called Maricol Amacna said she heard one of the men begging, "Don't kill me, sir!" The Commission on Human Rights says it is investigating the killings.

The police have dismissed allegations of wrongdoing as "useless and baseless," and have issued commendations to Llanderal and his men for "the extraordinary courage you have displayed in the successful operation...which resulted in the neutralization" of the suspects.

Llanderal denied executing drug suspects. "In police operations, we don't know where the bullets may hit," he said. "Some suspects retaliate, fight us. We are only defending ourselves." 

Additional Reporting by **Manuel Mogato**; Editing by **Janet McBride** and **Peter Hirschberg**



Manila police tell one story of a drug killing. Videos tell another

BY CLARE BALDWIN AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

NOVEMBER 27 BARANGAY 19, MANILA

The police report was clear. Anti-drug officers shot and injured three men in this poor district of the Philippine capital, then “rushed” them to hospital where they were pronounced dead on arrival.

But security camera footage obtained by Reuters tells a different story of what happened just after midday on October 11 in Barangay (district) 19. It shows that police took at least 25 minutes to haul away the men they had shot. The victims show no signs of life; police are seen carrying them by their arms and legs

and loading their limp bodies onto pedicabs to take them to hospital.

The footage casts new doubts on the official accounts of police killings in President Rodrigo Duterte’s 17-month war on drugs.

In June, Reuters revealed that police have shot hundreds of people during anti-drug operations, then taken them to hospitals where they are declared dead on arrival. Police say they’re trying to save lives. Bereaved relatives and other witnesses allege police are sending corpses to hospitals to disrupt crime scenes and cover up extrajudicial killings.

Police have shot dead at least 3,900 people in anti-narcotic operations since Duterte took power in June 2016 – always in self-defence, police say. Human rights activists blame police for thousands more killings attributed to vigilantes, but authorities deny any involvement.

A witness to the Barangay 19 killings told Reuters that the three men were executed and not, as the police claim, shot in self-defence. Police say they only use deadly force in self-defence, but a series of investigations by Reuters suggest they are summarily executing people.

The security camera footage not only contradicts the police account of the Barangay 19 killings. It also provides further evidence of another drug-war tactic: the disabling of surveillance cameras at crime scenes by the police. In the footage, filmed simultaneously by four security cameras, an officer is seen turning the camera that captured the action away from the scene.

The police understand the dangers posed by such footage, which can expose their actions. An active-duty commander involved in the drug war told Reuters earlier this year that police collude with local officials to unplug security cameras in areas where they plan to carry out a drug-war killing.

Reuters has obtained footage from all four security cameras, each capturing the episode from a different angle. Together, the cameras provide a unique record of a police operation from start to finish. Some of the Barangay 19 footage was previously aired by Philippine broadcaster GMA.

“The operation was legitimate,” said



Don't do
that to my
husband!
I will report
you! There
are CCTV
cameras
here!



Arlene Gibaga
Sherwin Bitas' wife

Santiago Pascual, the commander of the station that conducted the raid, in a statement to Reuters. A station investigation showed that his officers had followed correct operational procedure, said Pascual, and eyewitness testimony that they had opened fire on unarmed men was “untrue and unfounded.”

GROWING UNEASE

Police carried out the Oct. 11 raid a day after Duterte ordered them to leave anti-drug operations to the state-run Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency. The October memo marked the second time that Duterte has publicly told police officers to stop waging his drug war. He announced a halt to their operations in late January after news emerged that police had kidnapped and murdered a South Korean businessman. He lifted that ban one month later, saying drugs were returning to the streets.

In his latest order, Duterte said he wanted “to bring order to the operation/campaign against illegal drugs, thus pinpointing precise accountability.”

The announcement came amid escalating public criticism of alleged police atrocities. Recent surveys by Manila-based pollster Social Weather Stations have shown rising distrust of the police and unease with their brutal methods, which have been criticised by the influential Catholic Church.

The circulation online of security camera footage of police operations and vigilante killings has spurred public disquiet with Duterte's bloody anti-drug campaign. Outrage followed the August release of video that seemed to back up eyewitness accounts of how teenager Kian Loyd delos Santos was killed that month.

Police said they shot the 17-year-old in self-defence after he opened fire. Eyewitnesses said police took the unarmed boy to a trash-filled alley in northern Manila and shot him in the head. Footage emerged showing two officers marching a figure toward the spot where delos Santos' body was found. His funeral procession turned into the biggest protest yet against the drug war.

The officers in the Barangay 19 footage belong to an anti-drug unit from Police Station 2 in Manila, according to a police report of the incident. Of the 15 officers who appear clearly on the footage, only one is wearing a mask.

The report said Rolando Campo, 60, sold drugs to an undercover officer, who signalled for back-up. Campo “sensed the presence” of the police officers and ordered his two associates – Sherwin Bitas, 34, and Ronnie Cerbito, 18 – to draw their guns and open fire on them, the report said.

The police retaliated, leaving the three men “fatally wounded,” it said.

But the footage shows Campo chatting with people in the neighbourhood in the minutes before the police arrive, and not, as the report said, selling drugs to an undercover officer.

“FOLLOWING ORDERS”

The police operation doesn't seem to be undercover. The footage shows mainly plain-clothes officers, most of them visibly armed and some wearing body armour, entering the area through the alley on which Campo and Bitas lived. The officers pass in full view of the victims' house seven minutes before the shooting starts.

Arlene Gibaga, Bitas' wife, told Reuters that she witnessed the shooting and the three men were unarmed. “We don't have the money for guns,” said Gibaga, who has three young children with Bitas. She said her husband didn't deal drugs.

Police detained the men in an alley next to her house, she said, and asked her to get Bitas' ID. When she produced it, said Gibaga, one officer shouted “Positive! Positive!” and then the officers fired on Bitas.

“Don't do that to my husband!” she screamed, as the police shot Bitas. “I will report you! There are CCTV cameras here!”


One of the officers then aimed his gun at Gibaga and ordered her inside, she said.

The footage doesn't show the police shooting the three men, but does show an officer appearing to open fire on an unseen target.

Campo then falls backwards into the frame, his body hitting the ground. His arms move for a while before resting motionless.

Less than a minute later, the camera that captured the scene of the shooting is effectively put out of action: someone turns it to face the wall. A second camera shows a police officer reaching up and turning it away.

Station commander Pascual said the camera was averted for a “valid security reason” and to ensure the operation wasn’t compromised. His statement reiterated the police report’s version of events – “that the suspects first drew fire-arms and shot the operatives,” who returned fire in self-defence.

Later that day, at Police Station 2, Gibaga said officers told her it was useless to complain. “It’s the government you will be fighting against,” she recalled one officer saying. “Don’t get angry at us. We are just following orders.” 

Editing by **Peter Hirschberg**

How a secretive police squad racked up kills in Duterte's drug war

BY CLARE BALDWIN AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

DECEMBER 19 QUEZON CITY

The police who burst into Kathrina Polo's house on a rainy night in August 2016, then shot her husband in the head and heart, spoke a language she recognized but didn't understand: Visayan.

It's a common language in the southern Philippines. But in Polo's poor neighbourhood in Quezon City, hundreds of miles to the north, Visayan is rarely heard. "The police kept talking in Visayan because they knew I didn't

understand," she recalled. Their use of Visayan was a clue to the identity of her husband's killers.

The officers belonged to what would become the deadliest police station in Quezon City Police District. Called Station 6, or Batasan Station, it is on a violent frontline in President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs.

Of the 12 police stations in Quezon City, which is part of Metro Manila, Station 6 was by far the most lethal. Its officers killed 108 people in anti-drug operations from July 2016 through June 2017, the campaign's first year, accounting for 39 percent of the city's body count, according to Quezon City Police District crime reports reviewed and analysed by Reuters.

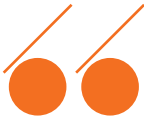
Almost all of these killings were carried out by Station 6's anti-drug unit, the reports show. The officers who formed the core of that unit hailed from or near Davao, the southern hometown of President Duterte. They called themselves the "Davao Boys" – and spoke in the region's language, Visayan.

There were 10 of them, their boss, Lito Patay, told Reuters. He took command of Station 6 in July 2016, shortly after the start of Duterte's drug war. Patay is also from Davao, where he once led a paramilitary police unit. Asked about Station 6's high death toll under his command, Patay said his officers only killed armed suspects who fought back. "I don't feel bad because we are just defending ourselves," he said in November. "We always follow the rule of law."

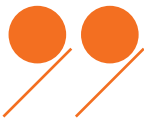
Patay said the men previously served under him in Davao, but declined to identify them. But eight of the Davao Boys' names appear on a police transfer order which one of them posted on Facebook. Those names matched the Quezon City crime reports reviewed by Reuters. The reports showed that this small group of men was involved in more than half of Station 6's drug-related killings, 62 out of 108 deaths, including the three operations with the highest body count.

Only one of the officers, Charles Owen Molinos, agreed to be interviewed by Reuters. When asked what was so special about Davao cops, he smiled and said: "Special kill skills."

Reuters spent four months retracing the



We are very angry about people involved in drugs. We want to crush them. That's our indoctrination.



Lito Patay

Head of Station 6 police station in Quezon City

Davao Boys' deadly path through Quezon City, speaking to scores of police officers and bereaved families and analysing thousands of police crime reports covering the first year of the drug war. These reports don't specify which officers pulled the trigger but usually name officers who took part in an operation. After arriving in Quezon City, the Davao Boys were quickly involved in dozens of kills in what police described as legitimate drug busts, but relatives, human rights monitors and lawyers say were often executions.

What emerges is an intimate portrait of how a secretive anti-drug unit mobilised and killed – then vanished to await new orders.

The story of the Davao Boys also highlights a larger dynamic: Many of the drug war's key police officers hail from or served in President Duterte's hometown, where the campaign's brutal methods originated during his time as mayor.

A Davao-based human rights group, the Coalition Against Summary Execution, blamed death squads in the city for 1,424 murders there between 1998 and 2015, mostly of petty criminals and drug users. Duterte, who was mayor for much of that period, denied any involvement.

At the time of publication, Duterte's office and the Philippine National Police had not replied to questions from Reuters.

The most prominent police officer from Davao is Ronald Dela Rosa. When Duterte became president in June 2016, he appointed Dela Rosa as his national police chief and gave him free rein to roll out Davao's crime-fighting model across the Philippines. "He is leaving everything up to me," Dela Rosa told Reuters at the time.

Since then, police say they have killed almost 4,000 drug suspects, all of them in self-defence. Human rights activists blame police for thousands more killings attributed to vigilantes, but police deny any involvement in those deaths.

Dela Rosa was helped by officers he knew and trusted from Davao – among them, Lito Patay. Dela Rosa handpicked Patay to run Station 6 in Quezon City, Dela Rosa's brother Ruel told Reuters. Dela Rosa and Patay are champion marksmen who first got to know each

other at shooting contests, Ruel and Patay said.

Like Dela Rosa, Patay has a reputation among police as an officer who loves action – he was shot in the arm in 2008 while fighting Communist rebels – and hates drugs. "We are very angry about people involved in drugs," Patay told Reuters, raising his voice and spitting out the words for emphasis. "We want to crush them. That's our indoctrination."

Local officials in Quezon City point out that Patay's surname sounds like the Filipino word for "death." Get involved in drugs, they joke, and "patay ka kay Patay": you're dead to Patay. One official who knows him well said Patay also joked about his name, and set his cell-phone ringtone to a melody commonly used by Philippine hearses.

In August, police chief Dela Rosa commended Station 6 for its "highest accomplishment" during the drug war. The following month, Patay was promoted and transferred to an elite police unit called the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group.

"CHANGE IS COMING"

Station 6 presides over six large barangays, or districts, that include government complexes, a giant garbage dump and some of the country's roughest neighbourhoods. The area has pockets of prosperity – mainly gated communities untouched by the drug war. The poorer areas have felt the full fury of Duterte's campaign, and of Station 6's drug squad.

Patay's arrival at the station in July 2016 coincided with a dramatic purge. Quezon City Police District relieved the entire Station 6 anti-drugs unit – 53 officers, according to local media reports – on suspicion of involvement in drugs, extortion and other crimes. The purge gave Patay the freedom to assemble a new drug squad, with his handpicked Davao Boys at its core.

The Davao boys had all served under him on previous police assignments, Patay told Reuters. "So they know me," he said. "They know my integrity and they know that once I've told them this is a thing to do, then they have to follow." He added: "They have to obey."

One of them was Charles Owen Molinos. According to the police crime reports reviewed by Reuters, Molinos has taken part in 29 operations that killed 56 people. He was one of six Davao Boys who took part in the operation that killed Kathrina Polo's husband, Cherwen, that rainy evening in August 2016.

At least five Davao Boys have public Facebook accounts that provide many personal details – although some of them, in an apparent attempt to obscure their identities, spell their names backwards. Charles Molinos, for example, confirmed that he is Selrahc Sonilom.

On 5 July 2016, eight police officers were reassigned from Police Regional Office 11 – that is, the Davao region – to Metro Manila, which includes Quezon City, “by command of Police Director Dela Rosa,” according to a photo of the transfer order that Molinos posted on Facebook.

Molinos' comment next to the photo reads, “Change is coming” – Duterte's campaign slogan. Molinos also posted a photo of a boarding pass for a July 4 flight to Manila. “Bye Davao see you soon,” he wrote.

With the transfer from Davao to Quezon City, on the main Philippine island Luzon, Patay spoke and acted as if he and his men were entering enemy territory. Davao cops don't take drug money, Patay told Reuters, but in Luzon “even (police) generals are corrupt.” He did not elaborate.

Before the transfer, Patay said he gave his team a pep talk. “We will be going to Manila. We are a team,” he told them. “We should not be corrupted there ... We will pray to God that we can resist temptations.” In Manila, Patay housed the Davao Boys in a makeshift barracks on the top floor of Station 6 and made sure they only fraternised with other officers, not with members of the public.

Ronnick de Ocampo, a member of Station 6's drug squad – but not a Davao Boy – said Patay's men were in their late thirties or early forties and called each other “bro” or its Filipino equivalent, “tol.” De Ocampo wouldn't tell Reuters their names, and became agitated and changed the subject when pressed further about them.

Patay's men were a breed apart. They wore bullet-proof vests even when they went out to buy cigarettes, said Reynaldo Esteban, an officer with the station's community relations team. Esteban said part of Patay's morning routine was doing dry-fire practice – that is, shooting with an unloaded gun – on the rooftop. “He loves his .45 caliber gun,” he said.

The Davao Boys remained aloof, but their purpose and resolve to wage the drug war were clear to Esteban, who works on drug-awareness campaigns. He said of Patay's men: “We are the prevention. They are the cure.”

He added nervously: “Joke!”

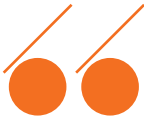
THE DRUG SQUAD

The crime data analysed by Reuters contains the names of 78 officers associated with drug-war killings at Station 6, including Patay and the Davao Boys. Some of these officers may not have been directly involved in killing suspects. They might have guarded perimeters, or posed as drug buyers during undercover operations known as “buy-busts,” police officers told Reuters. At least one third of the reports do not include a full list of officers involved in the operation.

Patay said he ordered his Davao team to lead the buy-bust raids, but also mobilised all Station 6 officers to help secure the perimeter during operations in “very dangerous” areas. “We are not super cops,” he said.

Officer de Ocampo said the drug squad had 30 operatives, including the undercover cops who posed as buyers and the heavily armed officers – such as the Davao Boys – who backed them up. The squad was usually assembled by text messages or through Facebook messenger, he said, and its members were expected to be able to report to the station in 15 to 20 minutes.

A Philippine police commander told Reuters in February that buy-busts are actually well-planned executions. Dealers can easily spot undercover cops and won't sell drugs to them, said the commander. Instead, police operatives executed their targets, who were usually unarmed, then planted guns and drugs to justify the use of deadly force, he said.



That's a consequence of them disobeying ... There is wrath coming for those who don't obey.



Metho Andres
The police chaplain
at Station 6

Patay said his officers only open fire in self-defence. Before each operation, he said, he prayed with his men. They prayed for their own protection, he said, but also “for the safety of our targets, for the safety of the community.”

Metho Andres, the police chaplain at Station 6 who prayed with the officers, told Reuters that the Bible justified the killing. Quoting Romans 13, he said Duterte was a God-appointed “agent of wrath” whom police should obey without question. He blamed drug users for their own deaths.

“That’s a consequence of them disobeying,” said the pastor. “There is wrath coming for those who don’t obey.”

Also among the men transferred from Davao to Manila was Richard Timon.

At Station 6, Timon would participate in police operations in which at least 60 people were killed, the police crime reports show. Five other Davao Boys were associated with the deaths of at least 50 people: Molinos; Michael Maderable; Ronie Banggat; Jun Ralph Piñero; and Emmanuel Ibit. Two others, Renante Solomon and Dennis Pal, would be involved in operations in which at least two dozen were killed.

Patay and two of his superiors declined to let Reuters interview the Davao Boys. One Davao Boy, Dennis Pal, did agree to be interviewed but then abruptly cancelled and told Reuters to contact his superiors. Maderable, Ibit and Solomon did not reply to messages sent to them on Facebook. Reuters could not locate Banggat, Timon and Pinero.

Only Charles Owen Molinos agreed to speak to Reuters. Molinos, who trained as a SWAT officer in Davao, has little sympathy for the drug suspects he was brought to Quezon City to combat. “They destroyed a lot of people,” he said. “So this is the time that they suffer the consequences.”

Molinos was involved in operations that claimed at least 56 lives, according to crime data analysed by Reuters. At first, he denied killing anyone in Quezon City. Then he said he had. When asked how many, he replied: “Zero.” Asked later about the tally of 56, he did not respond.

Among the victims was Kathrina Polo’s husband.

By the time the Davao Boys entered her neighbourhood just after midnight on Aug. 15, 2016, carrying assault rifles and wearing what Polo described as “full battle gear,” Station 6’s drug squad had killed eight people in six operations, according to the crime data.

That night, the squad added another five kills: Polo’s husband, Cherwen, three of his drinking companions and a neighbour. Cherwen had been celebrating his 39th birthday.

When police entered the house, said Kathrina, she was in a backroom and Cherwen was upstairs with his friends, sleeping off the booze. She heard footsteps going upstairs and then six gunshots.

She said she emerged from the backroom to find at least five police in the house. “Sir, don’t shoot because there are children here!” she begged them. An officer with a Visayan accent ordered Kathrina and her two children outside, she said. As they left, she heard more gunshots.

The operation was a legitimate buy-bust, the police said in a report on the incident. When Cherwen Polo realised he was selling drugs to an undercover officer, the report said, he and his companions drew weapons and opened fire. The officers had “no other option but to retaliate,” said Patay in a separate statement.

Police said a gun battle then erupted in which they killed the five men and injured a sixth. According to a police autopsy, bullets went through Cherwen Polo’s head, heart and forearm. There were no reports of any police injuries. Patay and police authorities did not reply to Reuters’ questions about the incident.

The police didn’t wear masks, said Polo. Asked if she would recognise the men if she saw them again, she replied without hesitation: “Yes.”

Reuters showed Polo photos of the Davao Boys from Molinos’ Facebook page, and she pointed to a man she recognised: Michael Maderable. Maderable is listed on the police report as one of the officers who participated in the operation.

His name also appears on the July 2016 transfer order. A Facebook account with

Maderable's name and photo says he is from Tagum City, where Patay was police chief before assuming command of Station 6. According to the crime data, Maderable was involved in operations that killed at least 55 people in the first year of the drug war. Reuters could not reach Maderable for comment. Senior officers declined to make him available.

Molinos and Maderable were among five Davao Boys involved in Station 6's deadliest operation – which was also the deadliest police operation in all of Quezon City in the first year of the drug war.

In September 2016, police entered the Old Balara barangay around midnight and shot seven drug suspects in what they said was self-defence. Police said that afterwards, in a bid to save lives, they rushed their victims to hospital, where they were declared dead on arrival.

A Reuters investigation in June found that police were using hospitals to hide drug war killings. Most of the seven men had been shot in the head and chest, said the doctor who declared them dead on arrival. The police deny any cover-up took place.

"Feeling proud at QCPD Police Station 6," Molinos posted on Facebook five days later. "We've contributed a lot here already," he wrote.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

In 2017, Station 6's kill rate began to drop, the records show. From July to December 2016, the first six months of the drug war, 87 people were killed. In the next six months, only 21 were killed. This made sense to Patay. He said his station's "first salvo" had frightened drug suspects, making them less likely to fight back.

But there were other forces at work. In January, the country learned that drug squad officers had abducted and killed a South Korean businessman at national police headquarters in Manila. The killing fuelled growing public opposition to the police and their brutal methods.

Duterte halted police anti-drug operations for most of February and vowed to dismantle the units. "Looks like (it means) coming home

for us because all drug units were abolished," commented Dennis Pal, one of the Davao Boys, on Facebook on Jan. 29.

But they weren't dismantled. They were rebranded by the police. "Anti-illegal drug units" became "drug enforcement units." The Davao Boys stayed put – and Molinos appeared on Facebook wearing a t-shirt with the new name, featuring a skull with red eyes and a grotesquely elongated jaw.

On Feb. 28, Duterte ordered police to resume operations, and the number of killings by Station 6 continued to climb. Eight Davao Boys took part in an operation that killed Bernabe Sabangan, 23, and his friend in May 2017. Police recorded it as a buy-bust.

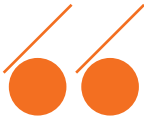
Mariel Sabangan told Reuters that her brother had been cooking and watching television when Patay's men burst in and handcuffed him. Mariel said she pleaded with them to let him go, but they bundled her and her husband outside. A minute later, she heard three gunshots. "I was already crying. I was going wild because I knew what that meant," she said.

Afterwards, she said, the police stayed to play basketball outside her house for another half hour or so, before taking the bodies of her brother and his friend to hospital where they were pronounced dead on arrival. The officers drank her dead brother's coffee and stole jewellery, cell phones, children's piggy banks and a motorcycle, she said.

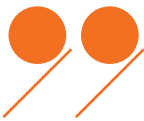
When Reuters showed Mariel pictures from Molinos' Facebook page, she said: "My heart beats fast." She recognised three men, including Molinos, who she said had been dressed in "battle gear." Molinos and another man had Visayan accents – "same (as) the president" – and Molinos put a gun to her husband's neck as he shoved him outside, she said. The police crime report names Molinos as one of the officers who participated in the operation.

Mariel says she now has trouble sleeping. "It's like I'm going out of my mind," she said. "I feel like the police could come back anytime."

Patay and Molinos did not respond to Reuters' requests for comment about the episode.



Those son of a bitch drug pushers shouldn't have human rights... They deserve to die.



Manuel Co
Captain of the neighbouring Commonwealth barangay

"THEY DESERVE TO DIE"

Patay expected total obedience and transparency from his men. "All your operations I have to know, because I should always guide," he said he told them. Patay also had orders to follow. He stressed that at Station 6 he was not implementing "my own policies" but those of the government and police leadership.

Patay said local politicians – known as barangay captains – had too long been afraid to set foot in some areas. He told Reuters he turned the tables on them with a message: "This is not the time to be afraid of the criminals. This is the right time that the criminals will be frightened of us."

Patay's methods drew a conflicted response from the barangay captains. "The killings were back-to-back when Patay was chief," recalled Crisell Beltran, the captain of Bagong Silangan district, where Bernabe Sabangan was killed.

She described this as "positive, negative." The killings made some neighbourhoods more peaceful, she said. "The negative, of course, was that people died."

Beltran said Station 6 never informed her before launching what she called "special operations." The barangay was only called afterwards, to ferry away dead or wounded suspects, she said. Beltran said on Oct. 8 she couldn't recall a single police killing in her district since Patay was transferred out in September. Patay and police authorities did not reply to a request for comment.

The captain of the neighbouring Commonwealth barangay, Manuel Co, said he was always forewarned about Station 6's operations. He said he even joined some of them, carrying the assault rifle that sat behind his desk when Reuters interviewed him.

"Those son of a bitch drug pushers shouldn't have human rights," said Co. "They deserve to die." Even so, Patay was "pro-life," Co said. "He doesn't want anyone to die. The only reason people die is because they fight back."

Co credited the drug war for a dramatic drop in crime in his barangay. The data tell a more ambiguous story. For all of the blood – Station 6 had a third more drug-related killings

than any other station in Quezon City in the first year – there was limited impact on crime.

From July 2015 to June 2016 – the year before Duterte launched his campaign – Station 6 recorded 1,129 major crimes, including murders, rapes and robberies. In the drug war's first year, it recorded 931 major crimes, a drop of 18 percent, according to crime reports.

But the proportion of major crimes committed in Station 6's area relative to all of Quezon City increased from 12 percent to 15 percent. In other words, Station 6's area grew more dangerous when compared with other parts of Quezon City.

Patay is now a regional commander with an elite unit that investigates high-profile crimes, the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group. The CIDG answers directly to police chief Dela Rosa.

Patay spoke to Reuters in October at the CIDG bureau in San Fernando City, about a two-hour drive north of Manila. The shelf behind his desk held trophies from recent shooting contests. He said he had used prize money to buy his men body armour.

Patay said he was waiting to reunite with the Davao Boys at CIDG. When they moved with him to Manila, he said, they had one request: to join him on his next posting and "not be left behind." They were now awaiting their formal transfer, he said.

For now, the men who led Quezon City's deadliest drug squad are in limbo. According to Molinos, the squad was living in a property in Pasong Tamo, a barangay in Quezon City. He wouldn't say exactly where.

"A safe house," Molinos smiled. "For Davao Boys only." 

Editing by Janet McBride and Peter Hirschberg

