



Philippines charges CIA tried to influence probe of Aquino killing to discredit Marcos

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MANILA

Top government officials in the Philippines have alleged that the American CIA was using the investigation of Benigno Aquino's assassination to discredit the Marcos administration, a highly reliable source says.

Senior officials have also privately urged the board probing last year's airport slaying of the opposition leader to defer an

information-gathering visit to the United States.

These approaches, which followed testimony that could destroy the government's version of the killing, represent a sharp departure

from the official policy of noninterference in the board's activities.

As such, they suggest the government is concerned that the board will implicate the military in the assassination and is seeking at the very least to postpone any such finding until after the May 14 National Assembly elections.

The source says that, three times in a single week, government officials - a Cabinet minister on one occasion, intelligence officers on the others - approached Ernesto Herrera, one of the five members of the Fact-Finding Board.

The first approach was made March 21 at the presidential palace, Malacanang. Mr. Herrera, a trade union leader, had gone to the palace for an official function. There, the source says, Blas Ople, minister of labor and an aspiring successor to President Marcos, urged Mr. Herrera to encourage the board not to visit the United States until after next month's elections.

The board is considering a visit to the US to interview several Filipinos who claim to have information about the Aquino assassination. One of them, a former airport technician who was at the airport Aug. 21 when Mr. Aquino was murdered, is thought to have information that throws considerable doubt on the government's version of the killing.

The board has not yet decided if or when it will visit the US.

On the evening of March 21, the source says, three military intelligence officers, all colonels, visited Mr. Herrera at his office. The three men had previously briefed the board on intelligence matters at the behest of Gen. Fabian Ver, the armed forces chief of staff.

Their message that evening, the source says, was that the board is being used by the CIA through the US Embassy labor attache and Ulrich Straus, the State Department's Philippines country director. Mr. Straus visited the Philippines this month on what the US Embassy describes as a routine annual tour.

The officers reportedly offered to provide documentary proof of CIA manipulation but have so far produced none.

The following night, one of the officers, Col. Galiled Kintanar, reportedly called on Mr. Herrera again.

Herrera is somewhat circumspect in discussing the visits. He says he meets Mr. Ople quite often on trade union business and admits that Colonel Kintanar visited him last week. He says, however, that the colonel's main purpose in calling was to enlist Herrera's support for a relative running for election in Herrera's home area.

The source of these reports, who works closely with Herrera at the Fact-Finding Board, says he is deeply irritated by the visits. "He doesn't even like the idea they think he can be influenced," the

source said. "I think the military have hurt their position as far as he is concerned."

(Neither Mr. Ople, Colonel Kintanar, or a representative of General Ver was available for comment on the story, despite repeated attempts to reach them.)

Another incident at the same time suggests the approaches were not merely the individual initiatives of worried officials.

On March 21 - the same day Herrera reportedly had his chats with Mr. Ople and the three officers - a prominent Manila columnist accused the State Department's Straus of visiting the Philippines on a spying mission.

Teodoro Valencia, widely viewed as a conduit for the opinions of the presidential palace, wrote in the Daily Express that Straus displayed "an unusual interest" in the workings of the Fact-Finding Board. In his column the next day he claimed that Straus had "summoned" members of the board and witnesses to the ambassador's residence. An editorial in the paper the same day made similar comments about the visit.

The Daily Express is owned by Benjamin Romualdez, ambassador to Washington and the brother of Imelda Marcos.

Board officials say Straus did not summon them to a meeting. They

went to discuss arrangements that would have to be made if the board decided to go to the US. Board officials say no witnesses were present at the meeting. (One of the subjects thought to have been discussed was police protection for the airport worker now thought to be hiding in the US.)

In a frosty letter to the Daily Express, US Ambassador Michael Armacost described the Valencia columns and the editorial as "very distorted and misinformed" and suggested the paper check its facts.

5 He also noted that the Straus visit had been planned in coordination with the Philippines Embassy in Washington.

The visits to Herrera and the attacks in the press came as the government's version of the killing was having a bad week at the board.

On the 20th, the day before the visits, Efren Ranas, a private security guard employed at the airport, testified he had heard a first gunshot while Aquino was still on the stairs leading from his plane to the tarmac.

He also said he saw Aquino, bloody and apparently unconscious, being supported down the stairs by his military escorts, and then dropped on the tarmac.

The government claims that Aquino was shot on the tarmac by

Rolando Galman, a small-time gunman hired by the communists. Galman, the government claims, was hiding under the stairs leading from the China Airlines plane.

Then on March 22, the Fact-Finding Board heard a member of the security force detailed to protect Aquino admit he was near the scene of the shooting when the killing occurred. Sgt. Leonardo Mojica had previously claimed he was in another part of Manila International Airport.

Although the board has not attempted to link Mojica to the killing, the board's deputy general counsel later noted this was the first time that a military man had been "caught lying."

Testimony by security personnel came to an abrupt halt after this. Their counsel claimed to have been taken ill and has not been able to appear since.

Meanwhile General Ver, the armed forces chief of staff, who was due to appear last March 26, canceled at the last minute, pleading urgent matters of national security.

The security personnel have been ordered to appear April 2 with or without their counsel, and General Ver is expected to testify this Friday.