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Philippine Congress okays bill on payments to human rights victims

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MANILA (Reuters) - The Philippine Congress has approved a bill awarding compensation to thousands of victims of human rights abuses under late President Ferdinand Marcos's 20-year iron rule.



A claimant for human rights violations during the regime of late dictator Ferdinand Marcos speaks while holding an envelope containing a cheque during a ceremony in San Juan, Metro Manila February 28, 2011. REUTERS/Erik de Castro

Under the final version of the bill approved by a bicameral committee late on Wednesday, payments amounting to more than 10 billion pesos (\$246 million) to the victims will come from funds recovered by the government from Marcos's ill-gotten wealth.

The abuses occurred during the period of martial law from September 21, 1972 up to Marcos's downfall on February 25, 1986.

Victims who can claim compensation include about 10,000 people, subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and execution during the Marcos regime, and their relatives who filed and won a class-action suit against Marcos in 1995 in Hawaii.

Marcos, who was overthrown in a popular revolt in 1986, fled the country and died in exile in Hawaii.

The bill needs to be ratified by a plenary session of Congress on Monday before it is signed into law by President Benigno Aquino, whose late father, a former senator critical of Marcos, was assassinated in 1983 at a Manila tarmac upon his return from exile in the United States.

"We urge Congress to immediately ratify the compensation bill and for President Aquino to sign the bill into law so that the reparation process can start," Neri Colmenares, a party-list representative and one of the proponents of the bill, told reporters.

Marcos's family has since returned to the Philippines and retains power and influence in the country. His wife Imelda, infamous for her collection of jewelry and shoes, is currently a member of the lower chamber of Congress while his son is a senator.

In 1997, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court awarded over \$600 million in funds, considered to be illegally acquired by Marcos, to the Philippine government.

The bill provides for the creation of an independent body that will evaluate and process payments to the victims, with compensation to be based on the gravity of abuse they endured.

(\$1 = 40.6300 Philippine pesos)