# Unsolved case, unserved justice

https://opinion.inquirer.net/182801/unsolved-case-unserved-justice

Even with three suspects in custody, the Anson Tan-Armanie Pabillo kidnapping-and-murder case is anything but closed.

As each day passes, questions persist about the circumstances behind the crime, and the police narrative of unpaid offshore gaming debts and sketchy tales of revenge sounds more like a poor attempt at deflection than the outcome of honest-to-goodness detective work.

For one, how was a syndicate with a known kidnap-for-hire history able to operate with such impunity? For another, why haven’t the authorities named the brains behind the bloody heist yet?

And the P200-million question: Where is the ransom money reportedly paid by Tan’s family to the perpetrators?

Until the Philippine National Police has credibly answered these questions, its chief, Gen. Rommel Marbil, has no business declaring that justice has been “served.”

On March 29, Tan, a Chinese Filipino steel magnate from Valenzuela City, who was also known as Anson Que, and Pabillo, his driver, were abducted. Some two weeks later, their bodies were found dumped in Rodriguez town, Rizal.

## Battered, bound, and strangled

The battered, bound, and strangled state of the victims’ remains showed that their deaths were not the result of a spur-of-the-moment crime but a “calculated kidnap-for-hire operation,” according to police. “These were not random acts but deliberate, contract-based crimes targeting individuals embroiled in disputes over unpaid debts, betrayals, or internal conflicts,” the PNP said.

On April 20, the PNP announced the arrest of three suspects, with a promise that the mastermind “will be identified and formally charged within the week.” Investigators learned that one of the suspects, David Tan Liao, also known by three other aliases, was linked to no fewer than five kidnapping incidents in Metro Manila since 2022, all with similar patterns and all allegedly tied to Philippine offshore gaming operators.

Pardon us for asking the obvious, but how could someone with such a checkered history have been allowed to engage freely in his criminal enterprise, recruiting henchmen, abducting victims, and executing them at will? Shouldn’t this person have at least been subject to surveillance by law enforcers?

It gets worse: It turns out Liao is also implicated in the violent kidnapping and sexual abuse of the finance officer of former Bamban Mayor Alice Guo, a case that happened in August 2024, at around the same time the PNP was supposed to have been cracking down on such syndicates.

## Follow the money trail

And then there’s the matter of the money.

Based on reports, a ransom amounting to P200 million was paid to the kidnappers, reportedly in cryptocurrency to make it difficult to track down.

But as former Sen. Panfilo Lacson, who once headed the PNP, noted, the police force has plenty of resources at its disposal to follow the money trail. Which means that if the government truly wanted to track it down, it could. The question is: does it want to?

Instead of confronting these questions, the PNP insists that the incident is not part of any trend of rising criminality. “These are isolated, calculated acts rooted in personal and financial vendettas. The situation is firmly under control. Our law enforcement strategies are effective. Criminal networks are being taken down,” Marbil said in a statement last week. What’s funny is that it was the police chief himself who used the plural “these,” betraying his own claim.

Marbil must have recalled that it was only in February when a 14-year-old Chinese student lost a pinkie finger in yet another kidnap-for-ransom case that remains unsolved. After the boy was recovered along a Parañaque City highway, officials claimed that no ransom was paid to the abductors. But could we take their word for it?

## Gnawing sense

It doesn’t take much sleuthing to realize what the authorities are up against: a well-oiled kidnapping industry that has grown fat under their very noses. If the PNP thinks three arrests and vague promises of charging an unknown mastermind are enough to restore confidence in the police force, it is sorely mistaken.

This case has stoked not only fear among the Chinese Filipino community and the general public, but also the gnawing sense that no one is immune to violence and a cruel end, even someone as wealthy and well-connected as Tan. And is there a more bitter fate than what befell his aide, Pabillo, a man with neither riches nor influence, who died as collateral damage?

If anything, his death is a testament to the tragic reality facing us today and which the PNP stubbornly refuses to admit: The police can no longer be trusted to protect even the most ordinary and innocent Filipinos from harm.

The PNP has a lot of work to do if it hopes to prove this conclusion wrong. It can start by arresting the mastermind in the Tan-Pabillo case, rounding up all other perpetrators, and returning the ransom—in full—to the grieving family.