# Justice for missing ‘sabungeros’

https://opinion.inquirer.net/184192/justice-for-missing-sabungeros

The stories first emerged in June 2022—about how some men had gone mysteriously missing in the previous months, seemingly vanishing overnight from their families and communities.

These men hailed from different parts of Luzon, but from the testimonies of family members and the occasional video footage that came out, it appeared that the men shared a common fate: They were kidnapped and taken against their will from their homes or even at public places, from thereon never to be seen again.

There was Michael Bautista of Santa Cruz, Laguna, last seen on April 28, 2021 when he was reportedly accosted by two individuals who placed him in handcuffs and hustled him away.

Ricardo Lasco of San Pablo, Laguna, suffered a more violent encounter, with a group of armed men barging into his house and carting him off, while also helping themselves to Lasco’s valuables.

Some disappearances were quieter, like the case of Jeffrey and Nomer Depano of Hagonoy, Bulacan, whose family said they had failed to return home after attending a cockfight in Lipa, Batangas. This was on January 5, 2022. Just a day later, three more men from the same town were reported missing—Edgar Malaca, Alexander Quijano, and Atong Sacdalan—and they too had informed their loved ones beforehand that they were off to Lipa to join a cockfight.

All in all, in just nine months, from April 2021 to January 2022, 34 cockfight enthusiasts or “sabungeros” went missing.

## Shadowy operators

Why were all these individuals targeted? According to the police, the victims were suspected of having committed cheating and fraud in e-sabong, the online equivalent of the age-old game of cockfighting that had now exploded into mass entertainment, thanks to internet streaming and technology as well as formal licenses from government regulator Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp. Certain shadowy operators behind e-sabong might be the culprits, exacting their revenge by presumably killing the victims, theorized the police.

The president of the country at this time was still Rodrigo Duterte, who had sold himself to the electorate as the unforgiving scourge of criminals, drug lords, and lowlifes. As public anger simmered over the question of the missing “sabungeros” and the criminal activities that e-sabong operations had apparently spawned, Duterte at first defended the industry as necessary for revenue generation, with P640 million a month added to government coffers.

But in May 2022, Duterte finally ordered a ban on e-sabong, admitting that he “did not really realize” the game’s widespread ill effects.

## Mercenary work

While e-sabong itself was outlawed, the investigation into the missing “sabungeros” proceeded at a suspiciously glacial pace. The police reported recovering clues and possible evidence here and there—the vehicles of some of the missing men found abandoned, or CCTV footage of an unidentified person using a victim’s ATM card to withdraw money—but the result so far has been the indictment of three suspects, all police officers, in connection with the kidnapping of Lasco, and arrest warrants for six guards of Manila Arena where some of the victims had disappeared.

The unsurprising presence of cops in the picture, likely hired to do mercenary work, indicated that this was a big-time undertaking, raising the question: Could it explain the gross delay in the investigation, and why, four years later, the ultimate fate of the 24 lost “sabungeros” remains unanswered? Just as crucially: Who did the cops and kidnappers report to? Who is the mastermind behind this heinous killing spree?

## Forensically hostile terrain

The government may now have the opportunity to find out, if it finally takes seriously the task of getting to the bottom of this case. The recent revelation in a TV interview by one of the suspects—that the seized “sabungeros” were then strangled to death and dumped in Taal Lake—offers a possible breakthrough that the Marcos administration must seize and subject to a full-blown investigation.

If the claim is true, recovering the bodies intact for forensic investigation may prove difficult, because, as Explained PH pointed out, “Taal ranks among Southeast Asia’s most forensically hostile terrains: a volcanic crater lake marked by high acidity, geothermal volatility, and sediment-thick waters. At depths surpassing 170 meters, it is not a graveyard, but a solvent—where the dead are not preserved, but erased … After four years, the likelihood of clean recovery is vanishingly low.”

Still, the government owes it to the victims’ families, and to the country’s imperative demand for justice, to peer into the depths of Taal Lake if necessary to verify the claim, and to track every other lead that could point to the truth. The number of victims, in fact, were over a hundred, said the suspect. Resolving this mystery for good begins with revisiting the stories of the disappeared, and pursuing to the end all the perpetrators of this horrific crime.