

Abducted Cebu dev't worker reported dead in Manila hospital

By Brynch Bonachita

Elena “Lina” Tijamo, an officer of a farmers’ welfare non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cebu who was abducted over a year ago, has been reported dead after a “goiter operation” at a Metro Manila hospital. She was 58.

A program coordinator of Central Visayas Farmers Development Center (FARDEC) and an agriculturist, Elena was forcibly taken from her home in Brgy. Kampingganon, Bantayan Island, Cebu around 8 p.m. on June 13, 2020 by four unidentified armed men accompanied by two women.

(Related: “Family strengthens call to surface Elena Tijamo” via bit.ly/3gRMaLF)

According to rights group Karapatan-Central Visayas, a certain Michael told Elena’s brother Carlos — who is in Manila — that his sister had passed away on August 28 at VRP Medical Center in Mandaluyong City, Metro Manila.

Elena’s family “positively” identified her remains after exchanging photos with the staff of St. Peter Funeral Homes in Quezon Avenue, Quezon City, FARDEC said in a statement.

Prior to this, Elena phoned Carlos around 1 p.m. on the same day to inform him that she is well and would soon be discharged from the hospital. After a few minutes, Michael called Carlos instructing him to visit the medical center, and later told him at the hospital that his sister had died.

Elena’s daughter Dawn confirmed to Karapatan-Central Visayas that her mother suffered from goiter but said that it was not a “totally serious” condition. It is also unclear how and when Elena was transported to Manila.

(Related: “FARDEC, Karapatan search camps for abducted community organizer” via bit.ly/3kBG44X)

The Tijamo family would later find out that Elena’s body was already brought to St. Peter Funeral Homes. As of writing, Carlos is unable to claim his sister’s body as it was registered under the name Ava Perez Reyes by a certain Neil Reyes, who brought Elena’s remains to the funeral home and claimed to be her nephew.

The family said they do not know any Michael or Neil Reyes, according to Karapatan-Central Visayas.

“These circumstances and these false names continue to hinder the family from claiming the body,” said Karapatan-Central Visayas in a statement.

“Karapatan-Central Visayas expresses indignation over another attempt of the state to withhold the body of a peasant rights advocate from her family as they previously did with Ka Randy Echanis and political prisoner Jesus Alegre,” it added.

Police officers forcibly took Echanis’ body on August 10, 2020 from a funeral home in Quezon City. Alegre, a farmer from Sagay, Negros Occidental who was detained over a murder charge that groups said was used to drive him away from protecting his family’s land, was only reunited with his family members after his death in prison.

FARDEC Executive Director Patrick Torres had said in July 2020 that the red-tagging incidents against the farmer’s organization and its community workers are connected to the abduction of Elena, who had also been a victim of red-tagging.

(Related: “With Anti-Terror bill underway, Cebu community worker abducted at home” via bit.ly/38lFe7L)