

## Parents of slain 9-year old girl: "our child was no NPA"

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NEW BATAAN, Compostela Valley (MindaNews/03 April) -- "Dili NPA ang among anak" (Our daughter was not a member of the New People's Army), Gregorio Galacio and Virginia Buya said of their eldest daughter Grecil, 9, whom the military and the media identified to be a "child soldier" of the NPA killed in an encounter Saturday morning just outside their house in Purok 6, Barangay Kahayag, New Bataan, Compostela Valley.

Galacio, a tuba gatherer, told military officials that on Saturday morning while he was still atop a coconut tree to collect tuba, a group of five NPA guerrillas arrived at their house to ask permission to use their pots to cook lunch and to take a bath at the nearby creek.

The Galacio house. Grecil's lifeless body was found between the cart and wood materials for construction. Carolyn O. Arguillas

He told Brig. Gen. Carlos Braganza, chief of the 1001st Infantry Brigade that he said yes to the request because he felt he had no choice. The group was armed. Galacio told MindaNews that the last time he spoke with his daughter was a few minutes before the first burst of gunfire. She was running down towards the creek across, to bathe, carrying what Galacio recalls as a green plastic which may have contained soap. The firefight started at around 8:30 a.m. with the soldiers claiming the firing came from the river. Villagers who fled the area claimed the firing came from "sa taas" (up there) where the soldiers who moved in from neighboring Davao Oriental, entered. Lt. Col. Rolando Bautista, chief of the civil relations office told MindaNews Monday night that the encounter with the NPA was "legitimate." Initial military reports from the office of the civil relations office of the Army's 10th Infantry Division said the child was a combatant and was allegedly firing at the soldiers using an M-16 rifle. The ABS-CBN website initially reported her to be a boy - an "11-year old NPA guerrilla" and Philippine Star referred to her as a "12-year guerrilla." The Philippine Star quoted Armed Forces Eastern Mindanao Command chief Lt. Gen. Rodolfo Obaniana as saying the soldiers were forced to fire at the child because she was also firing at them using an M-16 rifle. "She was firing at them and the soldiers had no recourse but to fire back, thinking she was an adult male combatant because she was good at using the M-16," Obaniana was quoted as saying. Grecil, who had just finished Grade 2 at the SimSimen Elementary School, was hit on the right elbow. But the fatal blow was when a bullet hit the left side of her head and blew her brains off. A military photograph of the fallen Grecil, face down, bloodied head, beside an M-16 rifle that she reportedly earlier carried, showed the rifle's height to be about the same as the girl's. A fully-loaded M-16 weighs several kilos and is heavy for an adult to lift.

The Galacio family. Grecil, 9, was the eldest of four children. Carolyn O. Arguillas

"Kagamay aning akong anak, Nuebe anyos. Unya ingon sila, NPA?" (My daughter is so small. Nine years old. And then they say she's NPA?) Virginia, Grecil's mother, said. Grecil's younger brother, Gary, 6, who was also bathing in the river when the firing started, broke down at the mention of his sister's name. Galacio said Gary had called on her "Ate" (elder sister) but there was no response from her. Grecil is also "Ate" to Valerie, 3 and Angeli, 1. "Ate" dreamt of becoming a doctor or a nurse, Gregorio and Virginia said. Holganza said he has ordered an investigation into the circumstances that led to the killing of Grecil. The results should be out in two days, he told MindaNews Tuesday at the tactical command post under the New Bataan grandstand. "We are still investigating," he said. But he acknowledged that initial reports about Grecil as "child soldier" were made because the girl was carrying a firearm and that even before the firefight, she was already seen carrying a firearm. Holganza said they are also investigating Galacio who, he said, is in the list of suspected NPAs because two firearms hidden in his house and "subversive documents" were allegedly seized by the soldiers after the firefight. Galacio denied being part of the NPA and said he knew nothing about the firearms and "subversive documents." Galacio told MindaNews his father, a former member of the paramilitary Civilian Home Defense Forces in the 1980s who trained to become a Scout Ranger but quit, was killed by the NPA within that decade. Holganza did not discount the possibility that Grecil was hit in a crossfire but said he wants to know why the NPA allowed the child to hold a gun or watch over a gun. The NPA has yet to issue a statement on the New Bataan clash. Holganza said reports reaching him indicated there were some 30 NPA guerrillas during the firefight but the entire group in the area consisted of 38 members and that they had been seen in the vicinity for about four days. Galacio said he saw the NPA only that day. Initial reports from Bautista's office noted about 15 NPA guerrillas during the firefight. The military lost one soldier - Pfc Ruben Bracera who was wounded and evacuated to New Bataan. Bracera expired on board the ambulance on the way to the hospital in Tagum City due to loss of blood, Holganza said. Bracera was supposed to marry his three-year partner on April 28. Grecil was the lone person killed in Purok 6, Barangay Kahayag. Her remains were found a few meters from their house, the head part towards the road leading to the creek. Galacio said he, his wife and two young daughters fled their house on the third volley of fire but did not see either Grecil or Gary outside the house. Virginia, who was supposedly going to the creek to bathe, too, had no time to dress up she fled covering the upper part of her body. Neighbors fled to safer grounds. But Lenlen Beriales, 31, wasn't able to run. She hid, along with her 22-month old and a four-year old, behind a boulder in the creek. She stayed in that position - water up to neck-level, for three hours. Galacio said Grecil must have returned to the house, found no one there, ran towards a safer place when shot. (Carolyn O. Arguillas/MindaNews)