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A Catholic bishop has demanded an investigation into the killings of 14 farmers during three police operations in the central Philippine province of Negros Oriental March 30.

Bishop Gerardo Alminaza of San Carlos said the victims lived within the boundaries of one of the diocese's mission stations. Ucanews.com reported they included a lay leader on the outskirts of the city of Canlaon, where eight men were killed.

"The parish administrator ... can vouch for (the victim's) moral character," said the bishop said, adding that he received information that the police did not even show arrest warrants.

"We demand a quick investigation into this and appeal to the authorities to restore peace and order," said Alminaza.

"What's happening? Are we still observing law and order?" added the prelate.

Ucanews.com reported the victims were killed during what authorities described as an "anti-criminality campaign" in Negros Oriental province, specifically in Canlaon City and the towns of Manjuyod and Santa Catalina.

Raul Tacaca, provincial police director, said the victims were communist urban fighters linked to foiled assassination plots against state forces. He said the victims

were killed after firing at police officers.

But witnesses, mostly relatives of the victims, including children, told the human rights group Karapatan that the victims were executed.

Lawyer Neri Colmenares said the victims' "ages and the circumstances of their deaths give lie to the government's claim of having killed communist guerrillas."

He said almost everyone died as their families watched. "What resistance are (the police) talking about?"

Two of those killed in the town of Manjuyod were elected village leaders.

Witnesses said the police officers had their faces and nameplates covered, while some wore tinted glasses, even in the middle of the night. Police ordered people out of their homes while the victims were shot dead, according to witnesses.

At least 15 other farmers, including two women, were arrested and taken to police headquarters.

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