

Philippine police kill 1, hold 5 alleged assassins
By JIM GOMEZ — Associated Press
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MANILA, Philippines — Philippine policemen killed a retired officer and arrested five other suspected hit men Thursday in a crackdown aimed at preventing violence in next year's congressional and local elections, officials said.

Police intelligence agents and members of the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission raided five hideouts of a syndicate in the northern provinces of Bulacan and Nueva Ecija and arrested five alleged members and killed one suspect, who had fired at them, national police intelligence director Charles Calima said.

The arrests "nipped in the bud plans to liquidate candidates for local elections this coming 2013 elections," a police statement said.

The guns-for-hire syndicate is also suspected of involvement in unsolved political killings in the Philippine capital and in northern provinces, including the murder of a Nueva Ecija town mayor in February, Calima said, citing statements of witnesses.

Among those arrested was a police intelligence officer assigned in the northern Philippines.

Officers seized five pistols, a rifle, a grenade, ammunition and a motorcycle. The guns would be tested to check if they had been used in past attacks, Calima said.

A recent raid by police commandos on a suspected den of hit men in Nueva Ecija's San Antonio town led to the seizure of 15 firearms, including assault rifles, but there were no arrests, police said.

More than 18,000 congressional and local positions will be decided in the elections next May, and violence and fraud are an ugly hallmark of past Philippine elections.

The Philippines began to use optical scanning machines to count votes for the first time in the 2010 presidential elections to produce results more rapidly and prevent violence and fraud from arising during the slow hand-counting of votes that took months to complete in the past.

"It's now hard to cheat because of the automated elections," Calima said. "The concern is some candidates may opt to eliminate rivals with these guns for hire."

A hired gunman could get 4 million pesos (\$95,200) to stage a killing, according to police.

President Benigno Aquino III has ordered police to take steps to curb elections violence - a tough feat in an impoverished country awash with tens of thousands of unlicensed firearms and burdened with warlord clans and powerful provincial politicians with private armies.

In the country's worst political violence, 57 people were herded from a convoy at gunpoint and gunned down en masse in southern Maguindanao province in 2009 in what officials say was an attempt by a ruling clan to prevent a rival family from challenging its political control in the region in an elections. Among those killed were 31 media workers.

Prominent members of the clan have been arrested and are being tried for the massacre.

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