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INQUIRER SOUTHERN LUZON

Inquirer Southern Luzon : Death, intrigue in island paradise

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY – Maria S. Abamo and her three children had just gathered around the dinner table in their home in Padre Burgos town in Quezon on New Year's Eve when she called up her husband, Rudy, on his mobile phone. She wanted to make sure that before the clock struck midnight, he would have a chance to talk to his children – aged 12, 11 and 8 years old.

"He was happy that we called and he asked that he talk to each one of us to greet us a 'Happy New Year.' He was jolly and told us that he missed us," Maria said in Filipino.

That was to be Maria's last conversation with Rudy, a construction worker and lone breadwinner of the family. Rodolfo Abamo, 41, was an employee of a company hired by the Amanpulo resort on Pamalican Island in Palawan.

Eight months after seeing him take off for his assignment, Maria found herself in a Marikina City morgue, staring at the ghastly sight of Rudy's remains in a wooden box.

Last week, four months after Abamo was reported by his employer to have died of a natural cause at the workers' barracks of the luxurious resort, the Mimaropa Regional Police Office (MRPO) lodged before the Palawan Provincial Prosecutor's Office a formal complaint against six people for murder, obstruction of justice and illegal transfer of a dead person.

Among those charged were Amanpulo general manager Miguel Guedes de Sousa, a Portuguese, and Supt. Manuel Aranas, chief of the Eastern Police District's medico-legal division, who autopsied Abamo in Marikina.

Mystery

Reports circulating hereabouts that Hollywood's biggest kindred spirits, Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Jackson, have been favored guests of Amanpulo are mere rumors, a resort insider told the Inquirer over the weekend.

The resort's reputation precedes its image. It was recently adjudged by Conde Nast Traveller magazine one of the world's best beaches, a plum that repeats the many that the place has received over the years.

While the rumor that Jackson had once flown to Pamalican in his private jet to hide from the paparazzi had indeed been so, its roster of fancied guests are unarguably the cream of society and finance. The reputation that it has built through the years perhaps explains the frenzied efforts of its management to play down a story that blots its escutcheon, tainted by the mysterious death of a minimum wage worker from Quezon.

"Let's not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. We have nothing to do with this case," Narcisa Villaflor, treasurer of 7 Seas Resort and Leisure Inc., told the Inquirer.

Natural cause

Amanpulo management insists that Abamo had died of natural causes, possibly a heart attack or pancreatitis (bangungot), sometime after New Year's Day, and that his body was found several days later slumped on the ground and decomposing.

Since the sea condition at that time was rough, preventing policemen based in Cuyo municipality from traveling to the island and conducting an investigation, resort officials said they decided to fly the dead body instead to Manila after seeking the permission of Cuyo Mayor Teodoro Villagracia.

Amanpulo's narrative of the events surrounding the death of Abamo has been contradicted by other parties, including police investigators who had been assigned to the case by the MRPO.

"It is not true that I ordered that the body be flown out of the island. They came to me and told me that someone died from natural causes and they wanted to bring the body to his relatives. I merely told them that they should first secure a death certificate from the rural health office," Villagracia told the Inquirer.

He was reacting to the statement issued by an official of 7 Seas Resorts and Leisure claiming that he ordered the transfer of the body to Manila for hygiene and safety reasons, bypassing the Cuyo police investigators who were waiting to be fetched by the company's private plane or for the weather to clear up so they could travel to the island by boat.

The mayor claimed that when he was informed by the resort about the condition of the body, he advised them to seek a medical certificate before flying out the cadaver. "They were not issued a death certificate because the rural health officer did not want to issue any without seeing the body. But it was their decision to fly the body out," he said.

When he was first notified of Abamo's death on Jan. 2, two days after Abamo last spoke to his family, Cuyo police chief Necerato Sabando Jr. said the resort's in-house doctor, Romcello Gumabon, told investigators about the possibility of foul play.

"We told them not to move the body. But without our knowledge and without seeking proper health certification, they airlifted the cadaver to Metro Manila," Sabando said in Filipino.

Amanpulo's belated statement claimed that Gumabon, the only doctor who saw the victim in the actual condition he was reportedly found, retracted his statement alluding to a possible murder because he was not qualified to pass judgment on whether there was indeed foul play.

Sabando earlier said police had reasons to believe that Abamo might have been murdered based on the initial report they received from Gumabon and later when they were able to interview some resort staff members.

He said he began to suspect that the resort was covering up what really happened to Abamo when he learned in the morning of Jan. 3 that the resort's plane had already flown out the body.

"They could have fetched us instead so that we could bring our Soco team to the place and conduct a proper investigation. But they chose to bypass us," Sabando said.

The resort's contractor, Excell Developers, argued that it was not their responsibility to bring the police to the island. "They (Cuyo police) went to the area only on Jan. 11, 2008, or more than a week after they learned about the incident. They should not blame their inefficiency on Seven Seas Resorts/Excell," Excell president Melquiades Castillo said in a statement.

Investigation

The MRPO investigation and management division also claimed that both Excell and the management of the resort were evasive.

SPO1 Nerrie Gallardo said that when the body of Abamo was brought to Marikina, "they were so in a hurry that they did not wait for us and instead sealed the coffin and set off to Quezon province."

Abamo's wife, whom the resort claims to have observed the autopsy, said she was merely shown the body when the box was opened. "I was shocked by the appearance of my husband. It was like he was torched, and his eyes and tongue were protruding," Maria said in Filipino.

She further said she never saw the autopsy performed, contrary to the resort's claim. She said that after opening the box, they went out to have lunch and when they came back, the body was already sealed in the coffin.

Gallardo said they had to follow the victim's wife all the way to Padre Burgos, a five-hour drive, in order to get her statement after finding out that they left without Excell coordinating with them.

"They (Excell) obviously did not want us doing an investigation," she said.

Excell Developers Inc. made no bones accusing the case investigators of ill motives.

Castillo called the filing of the case against them "highly irresponsible and primarily based on unconfirmed, unverified and reckless allegations."

"We suspect that some individuals are trying to take advantage of this situation, knowing that the incident happened in an exclusive island resort, and using the family of Mr. Abamo to advance their personal interests," he added.

In a letter addressed to the MRPO, a draft of which was furnished the Inquirer, Castillo said they were open and willing to cooperate in any further investigation.

In a text message to the Inquirer, Maria claimed on Tuesday that an Excell official warned her that he was being used by the police to exact money from her. "The big boss of Excell warned me that the police just wanted money from me," she said.

Maria added that she had no money because neither Excell nor the Amanpulo resort offered any compensation, apart from shouldering the expenses for the funeral.

"We don't even have food for dinner," she claimed.

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