



Stop the Attacks against Human Rights Defenders, and Protect Civic Space in the Philippines

(8 May 2019) – We, the undersigned organisations, strongly denounce the recent death threats addressed to Karapatan Secretary General, Cristina Palabay in the Philippines. These threats and the wider attacks against human rights defenders, journalists and civil society representatives signify the further constricting of civic space and the silencing of dissent in the country. We collectively urge the Government of the Philippines to respond to the threats against human rights defenders by taking genuine and effective measures for their protection.

On 22 April 2019, Palabay received threatening messages from someone using an unknown phone number saying that she and other human rights defenders will be killed this year. These threats highlight the risks faced by human rights defenders, which have significantly increased since President Duterte took office in June 2016. Duterte has consistently spoken out against human rights and human rights defenders. He has previously threatened to behead human rights advocates,¹ and blamed them for the increase in the number of drug users in the country.² While the Office of the President has been quick to assert that these statements were merely made in jest, such statements have translated into real-life repercussions for human rights defenders, who face violence and threats from both state and non-state actors.

In 2018, the Department of Justice filed a petition placing UN Special Rapporteur Vicki Tauli-Corpuz and other human rights defenders on a list of individuals who supposedly had terrorist connections. Being publicly accused of such connections greatly endangers their security.³ A month later, Duterte told people to ‘kill those useless bishops’,⁴ referring, among others, to Bishop Pablo Salud, who is known for speaking out against the Government’s ‘war on drugs’. This too resulted in anonymous death threats.

¹ Duterte threatens to behead human rights advocates.

<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/611343/duterte-threatens-to-behead-human-rights-advocates/story/>

² Duterte threats alarm rights groups <https://www.rappler.com/nation/154110-duterte-threats-alarm-rights-groups>

³ Palace: ‘Terrorist’ tag on UN special rapporteur based on intel. <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/164881/victoria-tauli-corpuz-un-special-rapporteur-terrorist-cpp-npa>

⁴ Philippines' Duterte: 'Kill those useless bishops' <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/philippines-duterte-kill-useless-catholic-bishops-181205132220894.html>

On the same day that Palabay received the latest threats against her life, human rights worker Bernardino Patigas was killed.⁵ Another human rights defender, Archad Ayao was killed just days later.⁶ Of the human rights defenders cases monitored by FORUM-ASIA in Asia in 2017-2018, the biggest percentage of killings - 48 per cent totalling 29 cases – took place in the Philippines.⁷

Attacks and reprisals against human rights defenders continue as the Government wages a systematic campaign to attack the independence of democratic institutions and to constrict civic space in the country. Individuals within the legislative and judiciary branches have faced reprisals for dissenting against Duterte's policies, while journalists have been targeted for their critical reporting. This campaign has included efforts ranging from: a general failure to investigate attacks against human rights defenders; to the use of repressive laws to judicially harass critics; to outright violence.

We condemn these attacks, and express deep concern for the government policies and practices that restrict and repress civil society and human rights defenders in the Philippines. We call on the Government of the Philippines to ensure thorough and impartial investigations of the attacks against human rights defenders, and to ensure a safe and enabling environment for them to conduct their work. We also urge the House of Representatives to enact and implement the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill that will provide legal recognition to and safeguards for human rights defenders, in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders.

We call on stakeholders in the international community to continue to closely monitor the situation in the Philippines, and to use their interactions with the Government, including in the area of trade and business, to emphasise the importance of reversing restrictive policies and building an enabling environment for the respect and protection of human rights. Specifically, we urge the UN Human Rights Council to advance accountability for human rights violations in the country by adopting a resolution establishing an independent international investigation into extrajudicial killings in the government's 'war on drugs', and to call for a halt to the attacks on human rights defenders, independent media, and democratic institutions.

Signed

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

CIVICUS

Front Line Defenders

⁵ Negros Occidental city councilor shot dead. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/228768-negros-occidental-city-councilor-shot-dead-april-22-2019>

⁶ BARMM human rights worker shot dead in Cotabato City. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/229468-barmm-human-rights-worker-archad-ayao-shot-dead-cotabato-city-may-2019>

⁷ Since 2010, FORUM-ASIA has been using an integrated database documenting system, to document violations and abuses against HRDs in Asia. The data can be accessed at <https://asianhrds.forum-asia.org/>.

FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders