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Philippines: Government must prevent further political killings

The government must take determined action to prevent political killings occurring and must do more to protect witnesses, said Amnesty International in light of President Arroyo's State of the Nation address.

"It is encouraging that President Arroyo condemned the killings of activists in her address to the nation, but she must now show she means business by implementing concrete measures to prevent the deaths of more activists," said Tim Parritt, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Programme.

"The government has a duty to protect every person in the Philippines, no matter their political persuasion or whether or not security personnel are linked to the attacks."

In her speech, President Arroyo called on witnesses to killings to come forward.

"Many witnesses to political killings -- even close relatives of the victims -- are simply too frightened to come forward. If the government wants witnesses to testify, it must strengthen implementation of witness protection laws," said Tim Parritt.

Death threats, other intimidation of witnesses and fear of reprisal are major problems contributing to repeated failures by police or prosecutors to file charges, or to trials failing to lead to the conviction of the guilty. These obstacles make it extremely difficult for victims' families to see justice done.

Attacks rarely lead to the arrest, prosecution or punishment of those responsible. Investigations often fall short of international standards, which require investigators to be independent of those allegedly responsible and to have the necessary investigative skills and resources.

Irma "Kathy" Alcantara was shot dead on 5 December 2005 near a hotel where she was taking part in a farmers and fisher-folk conference. The 44-year-old regional coordinator for a leftist political alliance had been receiving death threats and had been allegedly under surveillance by members of the security forces. Witnesses said two men on motorcycles fired at her. The investigation is believed to have stalled and her family is still waiting for justice.

Political developments during 2006 set the stage for yet more political killings. Since President Arroyo declared a week-long State of Emergency in February the peace process between the government and the communists has apparently collapsed, with the declaration by the authorities of "all out war" against communist armed groups. Preventative action is urgently needed to stop the death toll rising.

Amnesty International will soon be publishing a report and launching an international campaign against political killings in the Philippines.

Background

For more information, please see the public statement from 8 March 2006:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA350022006>.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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