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Philippines: Investigate and End Political Killings

Amnesty International urges the government to take immediate steps to end politically motivated killings in the Philippines, after three people were killed in the past 3 weeks. Eliezer Billanes, an anti-mining environmentalist and Rebelyn Pitao, a teacher and the daughter of a New People's Army (NPA) leader, were killed in separate incidents over the past seven days. There have also been attempts made on the lives of journalists, particularly in Mindanao. Ernesto Rollin, a popular local radio news programme presenter, was shot dead while another, Nilo Labares was also shot and critically injured.

The government must institute safeguards to protect human rights defenders and journalists, who are conducting legitimate activities. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the authorities to take further steps to improve investigations and prosecutions of political killings. These should include the use of independent forensic expertise and the creation of an independent body to monitor investigations to ensure impartiality.

Amnesty International welcomes the public commitment of the National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales and Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte to investigate the murder of Rebelyn Pitao. The organization will monitor the progress of this and other investigations, which must be prompt, effective, independent, and impartial. It is only through such investigation that impunity for political killings will end.

Background

In 2006, following international pressure, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo established the Task Force Usig (TFU), a special police body to investigate political killings. A special Commission of Inquiry known as the Melo Commission, whose mandate ended in June 2007, was also established to make policy recommendations on extrajudicial executions.

As of January 2008, the TFU had investigated 141 cases and filed 80 cases for criminal proceedings. However, because the investigations are inadequate, few cases result in convictions. The TFU and the Melo Commission have had limited success in ensuring justice for survivors and families of victims. Families often cite flaws in the justice process, such as delayed investigations, inadequate crime scene analysis leading to a lack of forensic evidence, and unwillingness to interview suspected military and police personnel. To date, most of those responsible for the killings of leftist political figures or activists have not been brought to justice.

Witnesses in cases under investigation by the authorities are particularly vulnerable to intimidation and reprisals, and sometimes even death. Many have complained repeatedly about the failure of the police to provide protection for them and their families, and said they have lost confidence in the ability of the Department of Justice to provide protection.