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PHILIPPINES: CONCERN OVER RAIDS, MASS ARRESTS OF ACTIVISTS

A coordinated set of raids by police and the army in Negros Occidental and Metro Manila and the subsequent arrest of dozens of activists represents an escalation in the ongoing crackdown against progressive and groups identified as “leftist” by the government, Amnesty International said today.

On 31 October 2019 police and military forces raided the offices of political party Bayan Muna, women’s alliance Gabriela, and labour group National Federal of Sugar Workers (NFSW) in Bacolod, Negros Occidental. On the same day, the home of two activists belonging to Gabriela and urban poor group Kadamay was raided by police in Manila. State forces continued the raids into the early hours of the following day.

In Bacolod City police and military forces conducted separate raids on the offices of Bayan Muna, Gabriela and NFSW, and arrested over 50 people, reportedly including some minors, accusing them of participating in explosives and firearms training. The government forces claim they seized firearms but arrested activists maintain that any weapons found during the raids were planted by security forces. The raiding forces, according to government sources, used a search warrant issued by a court that had found probable cause to believe that firearms and explosives were being stored in the organizations’ offices.

Earlier, police also arrested a Gabriela spokesperson and her husband, a member of Kadamay, following a raid on the couple’s house. The police claimed that they found grenades, a firearm, and fake identification cards in the house, which the couple claimed were planted. The couple’s two children, aged 2 and 10, were brought to a government-run shelter, according to Gabriela. Amnesty International has documented how police have fabricated crime scenes and planted evidence in the ongoing ‘war on drugs’ in the country and is concerned that this tactic could be employed by state forces elsewhere.

The groups targeted in the raids and arrests have been critical of the Duterte administration and its human rights violations, including the government’s ongoing “war on drugs.” In what appears to be an effort to discredit the groups and undermine the credibility of their claims, security officials have “red tagged” them, accusing them of being legal fronts of outlawed communist armed groups. Amnesty International is concerned that these allegations have become a way to undermine the peaceful exercise of the human rights of government critics, and have in numerous cases led to violent attacks, including killings.

The latest crackdown against government critics and political activists comes amidst a climate of almost total impunity inside the country. Amnesty International calls on the authorities to fulfil their international obligation to respect and protect the right to freedom of association of peaceful groups and organisations in the Philippines, as well as their duty to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights of activists, including their rights to life and liberty, freedom of expression, and freedom of peaceful assembly. These rights are guaranteed, among other treaties, by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Philippines is a state party, and by the Philippine Constitution.

Amnesty International urges the government to conduct a prompt, thorough, impartial and effective investigation into the groups’ allegations that weapons found on their premises were planted. The organisation also renews its calls to the Philippine government to investigate threats of violence against government critics, incitement to violence, as well as the violent attacks that have resulted from them; bring those responsible for such offences to justice in fair trials; and protect peaceful activists who are being accused of links to communist groups.

BACKGROUND

President Rodrigo Duterte has previously said that he would “go after the legal fronts” of the Communist Party of the Philippines, referring to groups with alleged ties to the communist movement, and has reiterated his order to the military to “destroy the [communist] apparatus.” Many of the targeted groups say that in the wake of these allegations

and the renewed presidential command, they have faced increased harassment from the government and attacks by unknown individuals, including killings.

Rights groups claim that over 80 people have been killed for example, in Negros since the start of President Duterte's term. They have stated that many of these killings were against those who have been 'red-tagged' by the government.

President Duterte also recently said that he had instructed Lt. Col. Jovie Espenido, the newly promoted deputy director for operations of the Bacolod City police, that he is ["free to kill everybody"](#) in the city because of the proliferation of illegal drugs there, sparking concerns that this could worsen the climate of impunity in the province and elsewhere.