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Philippines: Threats against human rights organisations must be retracted

Amnesty International strongly condemns recent statements made by senior officials in the Duterte administration, attempting to link human rights organisations in the country to “drug lords.” The allegations are the latest dangerous attempt by the government to target human rights defenders and delegitimise their work, instead of ensuring accountability for widespread and systematic human rights violations in the ‘war on drugs’. The Philippine government must end its campaign of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and retract its latest statements, which place the safety of those that criticize the government, in peril.

On 26 March 2018, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Cayetano stated that human rights organisations “were being used by drug lords”, “unwittingly.” The following day, Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque went further, insinuating that human rights groups may be part of “destabilisation plots” mounted by drug lords against the government. On 28 March 2018, a spokesperson from the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) stated that the agency, together with the Philippine National Police (PNP), was “probing” links between drug syndicates and human rights groups.

Amnesty International believes that the sole purpose of these vicious allegations are to intimidate human rights defenders working tirelessly to protect the rights of Filipino men, women and children, especially those in poor and marginalised communities who have been the victims of the governments campaign of unlawful killing. If on top of official statements, the PDEA and PNP have embarked on investigations against peaceful human rights defenders, this marks a new low which further undermines the credibility and international reputation of the Philippines.

The latest attack by the government on human rights defenders follows an announcement by President Duterte that the Philippines is withdrawing from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The withdrawal comes just weeks after it was announced by the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC, that it was opening a preliminary examination into the situation in the country.

The Rome Statute provides that a state cannot avoid its obligations by withdrawing from the Rome Statute. Amnesty International believes that a withdrawal from the Rome Statute would only affect the temporal jurisdiction of the Court. That is, the Court has jurisdiction until the date that a withdrawal becomes effective – which is one year after the official notification of withdrawal to the United Nations. Therefore, the withdrawal cannot prevent the ICC’s Office of the Prosecutor from opening an investigation, and the Philippines remains under a continuing obligation to cooperate with the Court. Crucially, withdrawal from the Rome Statute does not extinguish the Philippines government’s international legal obligations to protect human rights defenders, put an end to human rights violations, and to provide measures for accountability for any crimes under international law which officials, irrespective of rank or status, have committed.