

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

3 May 2019 ASA 35/0308/2019

PHILIPPINES: ENSURE PROMPT, THOROUGH INVESTIGATION OF LATEST ATTACKS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Amnesty International is deeply alarmed by the recent escalation of attacks against human rights defenders and activists in the Philippines. On 1 May, Archad Ayao, an investigator for the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, was shot dead in Cotabato City, southern Philippines, by a still unidentified gunman. On 22 April, human rights worker and local politician Bernardino Patigas was gunned down in Escalante City, Negros Occidental. Hours later, several of his colleagues -- including Karapatan Secretary General Cristina Palabay -- received threatening text messages from an unknown person warning them that they are likewise targeted to be killed this year.

Besides direct physical violence, human rights defenders have faced delegitimization efforts that could put them in danger. In March, military officials linked the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, to the alleged "terrorist activities" of the Communist Party of the Philippines, in a seeming attempt to undermine her human rights work. As this case exemplifies, government officials have exposed numerous defenders and activists to a greater risk of attacks by "red-tagging" them -- i.e., linking them to Communist armed groups, or to terrorist activities, based on their peaceful criticism of government policies. Groups that have been "red-tagged" by the government include Karapatan, Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, think-tank Ibon Foundation, and the National Union of People's Lawyers which has been giving legal assistance to political prisoners, activists, and relatives of victims of extrajudicial executions.

The attacks against human rights defenders come amidst a deteriorating human rights situation. Over the past three years, thousands of Filipinos, mostly from poor and marginalized communities, have been killed by police in the name of the government's ongoing "war on drugs." The killings continue on a daily basis despite domestic and international condemnation. Human rights defenders who have been calling for accountability and an end to the killings have been subjected to sustained harassment via the criminal justice system. They include Senator Leila de Lima, who has been held in detention for over two years on politically-motivated drug charges; news outlet Rappler and its CEO Maria Ressa, facing 11 legal complaints, and several other journalists and human rights lawyers who have been publicly accused of working to destabilize the government.

The Philippine authorities are obligated to take action to protect human rights defenders under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the Philippines is a state party. The ICCPR requires states parties to uphold and protect individuals' rights to life [Article 6(1)], freedom of expression [Article 19(2)], freedom of assembly [Article 21], and equal protection under the law [Article 26], and requires states parties to provide effective remedies when individuals' rights are violated [Article 2(3)].

Amnesty International calls on the Philippine government to conduct prompt, effective, and impartial investigations into the attacks on human rights defenders, and to bring those responsible to justice in fair trials. The authorities and government officials should also desist from making pronouncements that disparage the valuable and necessary work of human rights defenders, actively protect human rights defenders from harm, and ensure an environment that is safe and supportive for them to carry out their advocacy.

BACKGROUND

On 1 May, Archad Ayao, a human rights investigator from the Regional Human Rights Commission of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, was shot dead by a still unidentified gunman in Cotabato City. Police were looking into whether the killing was connected to the human rights cases in the southern Philippines that Ayao had been investigating.

On 22 April, human rights defender and local politician Bernardino Patigas was gunned down as he was leaving an election-related activity in Escalante City, Negros Occidental. He was the founder of North Negros Alliance for Human Rights Advocates, a member-organization of the human rights alliance Karapatan. Hours after he was murdered, Cristina Palabay, the secretary-general of Karapatan, received a text message expressing condolences over the death

of Patigas, and warning her and several other individuals -- all human rights workers -- that they are also targeted to be killed this year.

On 13 March, an official of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Major Gen. Antonio Parlade Jr, accused UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz of being affiliated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its alleged "terrorist activities." Before this, in July last year, a Manila court ordered the Philippine Department of Justice to remove Tauli-Corpuz and three other people from its petition to declare the CPP a terrorist organization. The petition, which originally named over 600 alleged "terrorists," is now down to eight names and is still being heard in court.