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PHILIPPINES: PROBE OF POLICE CHIEF SHOULD EXTEND TO OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN THE “WAR ON DRUGS”

The ongoing government probe into the Philippine National Police (PNP) chief’s alleged involvement in the sale of illicit drugs seized during police operations should be extended to include unlawful killings and other human rights violations committed in anti-drug operations, Amnesty International said today.

Ongoing Senate hearings have revealed allegations by two retired senior police officials that PNP chief General Oscar Albayalde had tried to protect “ninja cops” – a group of policemen accused of “drug recycling” or selling illicit drugs confiscated during anti-drug operations conducted by the police in 2013. Albayalde has denied the allegations, but the Philippine Department of Interior and Local Government has initiated a high-profile investigation into the claims.

That police officers are themselves involved in the trade of illicit drug is not new – even official drug watch lists include hundreds of active police officers with supposed links to the drug trade. The new allegations, however, point to high-level official involvement in the drug trade and the concealment of wrongdoing, highlighting double standards and additional flaws of the anti-drugs campaign that has left thousands dead.

Amnesty International has long described the “war on drugs” as a deliberate war on the poor, characterized by widespread and systematic extrajudicial executions and an array of other human rights violations that, in the opinion of the organization, amount to crimes against humanity. Not only have relatives of victims of extrajudicial executions described how police have killed people suspected of using or selling drugs; they have spoken of other police abuses such as theft and fabricating evidence. Victims have claimed that police often resort to planting evidence – from a small amount of illicit drugs or drug paraphernalia to even guns – on the bodies of those who have been killed, and have stolen money and other items from raided homes.

Despite mounting evidence of egregious abuses, there have been no meaningful efforts at the national level to ensure justice and reparations for the thousands of victims of extrajudicial executions carried out by both the police and unknown armed individuals at least some of whom are connected to the police. In the face of repeated calls to end the deadly campaign, reports of killings continue on a daily basis. Indeed, police have been repeatedly reassured by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte that they will be shielded against any prosecution stemming from actions taken during drug-related operations.

In a 2019 report, Amnesty International documented additional alarming practices, including the transfer and promotion of police officers previously involved in deadly anti-drug raids, and abductions of people suspected of using drugs who end up dead, classified as “casualties” of police operations.

A thorough investigation into these serious crimes is long overdue. Amnesty International calls on the Philippine authorities to suspend from active duty any police officer against whom there are credible allegations of involvement in human rights violations and other serious abuses, pending the conclusion of the investigation.

Cases of suspected unlawful killings with police involvement should be investigated and prosecuted as criminal offences rather than dealt with through administrative and disciplinary processes, which must never substitute for criminal procedures in such cases. Criminal charges should be pressed in any case where investigations uncover sufficient, admissible evidence of responsibility for offences involving human rights violations, including unlawful killings, involvement in murders by paid killers, planting of “evidence” or stealing from raided homes or victims. Such investigations and prosecutions should include persons with command or superior responsibility, irrespective of rank or status, including the highest echelons of the police and those with superior responsibility over the police.

The organisation also calls on the International Criminal Court, in light of the absence of meaningful action from the Philippine authorities, to hold accountable all those responsible for having committed crimes against humanity in the Philippines, and to expedite its preliminary examination with a view to opening a formal investigation into the situation as a matter of urgency.

BACKGROUND

On 1 October 2019, during a Senate hearing on “ninja cops”, a former Director of the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) linked police chief Gen. Oscar Albayalde to the cover-up of a drug “recycling” job (involving the selling of illicit drugs seized in police operations) in 2013.

A few days later, a former Central Luzon police chief (who is currently the head of the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency) testified that Albayalde had indeed tried to protect the officers, who were recommended for dismissal. The officers were only demoted and remain on active duty. Albayalde has denied the accusations against him and has asked the public to “move on” from the issue. The government has insisted that the accusations do not damage the credibility of the anti-drugs campaign.

In July 2019, Amnesty International published a report, “‘They just kill’: Ongoing extrajudicial executions and other human rights violations in the Philippines ‘war on drugs’” which documented how police commanders who previously supervised abusive operations in Manila, that the organization considered amount to crimes against humanity, had been transferred to Central Luzon, and been allowed to continue to oversee a campaign of killing in the province.