

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

14 February 2020

ASA 35/1818/2020

PHILIPPINES: CEASE ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Amnesty International condemns the Philippine government's latest efforts to clamp down on the media, including the Solicitor General's ongoing attempts to shut down ABS-CBN, one of the country's largest TV networks. The *quo warranto* petition filed by the Office of the Solicitor General asking the Philippine Supreme Court to forfeit ABS-CBN's legislative franchise would imperil media freedom and violate the rights to freedom of expression and access to relevant and accurate information.

Amnesty International calls on the government to immediately end any moves to shut down ABS-CBN, as well as other media networks in the country, and urges it to respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom expression and media freedom. The organization views the government's latest attack against a media network with alarm, seeing it as a sign of the further deterioration of the country's human rights situation.

The petition filed by the Solicitor General follows repeated attacks against ABS-CBN by no less than President Rodrigo Duterte himself, who has publicly accused the network of not airing his political advertisements during the 2016 elections, and of circumventing laws on foreign ownership. In addition, the severity of the proposed penalties appears out of proportion to the seriousness of the alleged offenses.

Several bills are already pending before the Philippine Congress seeking to extend the network's franchise. By filing the *quo warranto* petition, the Duterte administration seems intent on skirting the regular legislative process in the granting of media franchises. This is consistent with the government's worrying record of stifling the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful dissent.

It should be noted that the alarming attacks against ABS-CBN occur in the context of the wider crackdown on independent media and government critics, including other media platforms. Politically-motivated charges levelled against online media platform Rappler and its CEO Maria Ressa, following its in-depth investigative reporting of human rights violations and abuses in the so-called "war on drugs," attest to the shrinking space for criticism of the government.

Since the Duterte administration came to power, it has threatened civil liberties on several fronts. Human rights groups have been increasingly undermined and vilified; government critics and activists have been harassed, arbitrarily detained and killed; journalists and media organizations have been threatened and targeted with lawsuits. Meanwhile, the police have continued to carry out suspected extrajudicial executions as part of the government's ongoing anti-drug campaign, overwhelmingly targeting the poor.

Amnesty International calls on the Philippine government to cease its relentless efforts to muzzle journalists and media organizations, and to fulfil its obligations under domestic and international law to safeguard and respect the right to freedom of expression and media freedom. The Duterte administration should end its relentless attacks on human rights and the rule of law.

BACKGROUND

On 10 February 2019, Philippine Solicitor General Jose Calida filed a *quo warranto* petition before the Supreme Court, asking it to revoke the existing franchise of ABS-CBN Corporation and its subsidiary, ABS-CBN Convergence, Inc. The country's chief lawyer cited violations supposedly committed by the TV network, such as allowing foreign investors despite constitutional prohibitions. Calida also accused the network of launching a subscription service without the required government approval. The Supreme Court has given ABS-CBN 10 days to respond to the petition.

Several bills are currently pending before the Philippine Congress for the renewal of the network's franchise, but these have not been taken up since the current Congress began its term in July 2019. Amnesty International believes that these delays may be politically motivated. ABS-CBN's franchise is set to expire in March 2020.

President Rodrigo Duterte has repeatedly attacked ABS-CBN for allegedly failing to run his paid political advertisements during the 2016 elections, which he won. During a recent speech, Duterte advised the network's executives to sell the company as a way out.

ABS-CBN has produced numerous investigative reports highlighting extrajudicial executions committed as part of the government's so-called "war on drugs." Similarly, news website Rappler and its CEO Maria Ressa, who have also been critical of the anti-drug campaign in their reporting, are facing a string of lawsuits, including charges of tax evasion, cyber libel and foreign ownership.