

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

18 December 2020 ASA 35/3469/2020

PHILIPPINES: RELEASE ‘RED-TAGGED’ JOURNALIST AND ACTIVISTS AND DROP FABRICATED CHARGES AGAINST THEM

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the continued detention of journalist Lady Ann Salem and six other activists following separate raids in Metro Manila on 10 December. The organisation believes her arrest and detention form part of a well-established pattern of Philippine authorities using false allegations to punish and silence activists. Amnesty International is calling on the government to release Salem and the other activists targeted because of their human rights work, and to drop the charges against them. The organization also calls for prompt, impartial, and effective investigations into allegations that weapons found in the possession of Salem and the other activists were planted.

Salem is the editor of the alternative news site *Manila Today* and the communication officer of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television. Six trade union organizers – Romina Astudillo, Mark Ryan Cruz, Joel Demate, Rodrigo Esparago, Jaymie Gregorio and Dennise Velasco – were also arrested in separate raids on the same day. All seven of them face non-bailable charges of possession of illegal firearms and explosives, which police alleged were seized during the raids.

The activists’ groups and families, however, deny these allegations and maintain that police authorities fabricated evidence against them and cited irregularities during the conduct of the raid. In a statement, *Manila Today* said Salem and Esparago, who were arrested together, were forced to turn away for an hour, so that they were unable to watch as the police searched the premises. Velasco’s wife also told the media that the police made him lie face down on the floor during the raid.

Charges of the possession of illegal firearms and explosives have repeatedly been used to arrest and detain members of groups perceived to be critical of the government. In October 2019, police carried out [coordinated raids](#) in Negros Occidental province and Metro Manila, resulting in the arrest and continued detention of dozens of activists over allegations of illegal possession of firearms and explosives. Those arrested included Reina Mae Nasino, an organizer for the urban poor group Kadamay, whose three-month-old baby died after being separated from her following an order by a Manila court. The police’s heavy-handed treatment of Nasino during her baby’s funeral sparked domestic and international outrage. Amnesty International expressed concern over allegations that authorities had fabricated the charges against these activists.

On 2 December, activist Amanda Echanis of the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women was also arrested along with her month-old baby in Cagayan province, again over illegal possession of firearms, ammunitions and explosives. Echanis is the daughter of activist and

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peace advocate [Randall Echanis](#), who was murdered along with his neighbour at his home in Quezon City on 10 August.

The seven activists arrested on 10 December, when the world observed International Human Rights Day, belonged to organizations that have previously been 'red-tagged' – the labeling of groups or individuals perceived to be critical of the government as “communists” or “terrorists”. Following the arrest, the government-created Facebook page, National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, posted that these seven individuals were “NPA (New People’s Army) leaders”.

National and international human rights groups, including [Amnesty International](#), have been calling on the government to end the practice of ‘red-tagging’, which has led to an increase in human rights violations against political activists and human rights defenders. Human rights defenders and activists have experienced increasing attacks against them – including killings and threats often by unknown individuals, as well arrests and detention by the authorities – after being ‘red-tagged’.

Under international law and standards, the Philippines has an obligation to ensure the protection of the rights of all, including the rights to life, freedom of expression, and freedom of peaceful assembly, as guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the Philippines is a state party.

Amnesty International urges the government to end its campaign of ‘red-tagging’ of media outlets and political activists, and immediately take action to stop the violence, threats and harassment against them. The organisation also calls on the government to release Salem and other activists who have been arrested for their human rights work. Furthermore, the government should promptly and effectively investigate allegations that charges have been fabricated to punish and silence activists and human rights defenders and bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to justice in fair trials.