

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

24 February 2021

ASA 35/3744/2021

PHILIPPINES: DETAINED SENATOR'S PROLONGED DETENTION A GRAVE INJUSTICE

Amnesty International marks with grave concern the ongoing arbitrary detention of human rights defender and Filipino Senator Leila de Lima, now reaching its fourth year on 24 February 2021. Amidst the worsening human rights situation in the country, the organization continues to strongly urge the Philippine government to drop the politically motivated charges against her, order her immediate and unconditional release, and provide remedy for past and ongoing violations of her human rights, including by bringing to justice in fair trials those suspected of criminal responsibility for such violations.

Senator Leila de Lima was one of the first politicians to be targeted by the Duterte administration since it came into power in June 2016. The persecution of Senator de Lima – which includes relentless verbal attacks against her by President Rodrigo Duterte himself and other government officials – began when she sought to investigate the killings and other associated human rights violations under the Duterte government's "war on drugs" as Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights. Now on its fifth year, these murderous anti-drug operations have seen thousands of people suspected of using or selling illicit drugs killed by the police and armed individuals, with justice remaining elusive for the victims and their families. The rampant impunity for drug-related killings has led to an escalation of other human rights violations, including widening attacks such as killings, threats and harassment of political activists, human rights defenders and members of the media.

The Philippine Department of Justice filed three cases against Senator de Lima in February 2017 on charges of illegal drug trading, which it later changed to conspiracy to commit illegal drug trading. On 17 February 2021, the court ordered the dismissal of one of these cases, stating that no link was proven between the Senator and her co-accused, Jose Adrian Dera, who supposedly helped solicit money from individuals with criminal convictions for her election campaign in 2016. While Amnesty International welcomes the court decision dismissing one of the three drug-related cases against the Senator, it notes that the same court allowed the second case to proceed while also denying her bail petition. The Senator has also filed a bail petition for the third case, the court proceedings for which are ongoing.

Amnesty International calls on the Philippine authorities to dismiss all charges against Senator de Lima. She is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising her human rights and for defending the rights of others. As she marks her fourth year in detention, Amnesty International joins many other groups in reiterating calls on the Philippine authorities to drop all cases she is facing and ensure her immediate and unconditional release. She must also be provided with a remedy for her unjust and prolonged detention and other human rights violations committed against her, including by prosecuting anyone suspected of criminal responsibility in proceedings that are in line with human rights standards on due process.

Undue delays continue to mark court hearings on Senator de Lima's cases, including the repeated failure of prosecution witnesses to show up in court in late 2020 and changes in judges handling one case. Recent developments in some of these proceedings point further to what Amnesty International and other domestic and international human rights organizations have been saying: that the charges against Senator de Lima were nothing more than vicious attempts by the Duterte administration to silence her and impede

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

her work as a human rights defender and a duly-elected government official. These developments include statements made under oath by prosecution witnesses – including several government officials – that have revealed no evidence of the crimes allegedly committed by Senator de Lima, including anything to implicate her in illegal drug trading.

As the violations against de Lima continue under the broader context of increasing impunity for human rights violations in the country, Amnesty International also strongly urges the government to investigate and put an end to the killings, threats and harassment of human rights defenders, activists, Indigenous people, independent media, government critics and other targeted groups. Further, in the absence of domestic accountability, the international community bears the responsibility of calling out the Philippine government's worsening human rights record – including by supporting an independent investigation by the UN Human Rights Council into the country's human rights situation since 2016 – with a view to ensuring justice for the thousands of victims of the Duterte administration's abuses.