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Philippines: Onslaught against human rights defenders must end

The Philippine government must immediately halt its latest wave of dangerous attacks on human rights defenders and international institutions, Amnesty International said today. Human rights defenders - among them two UN human rights experts - must be guaranteed protection in the country and be allowed to carry out their work freely.

On 21 February 2018, the Department of Justice filed a petition to the Manila Regional Trial Court against over 650 individuals, seeking to designate them as “terrorists” under the Human Security Act of 2007 (Republic Act 9372), also known as the anti-terrorism law. Among those listed are human rights defenders including the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, a Philippine national. The Special Rapporteur had recently spoken out against the government, criticizing the displacement of Indigenous Peoples during military operations in the south of the country.

Under the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations of 1946, UN experts have immunity from legal proceedings of every kind undertaken in the course of their mandated work. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety and wellbeing of the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, as well as the other individuals mentioned in the government’s petition, who include members of prominent human rights organization Karapatan, and former representatives to UN expert bodies on indigenous peoples. The organisation calls on the Philippine authorities to ensure their safety and end all attacks on activists, human rights defenders and political dissenters in the Philippines.

In recent days, President Duterte has also launched a further attack on UN Special Rapporteur on summary, arbitrary and extrajudicial killings, Agnes Callamard. The UN expert has been seeking to visit the Philippines in order to investigate the killings of thousands of Filipinos, the vast majority of them from poor and marginalised backgrounds, in the government’s deadly anti-drug campaign, which in Amnesty International’s view may amount to crimes against humanity. Amnesty International raised further concerns about the treatment of

UN experts at the UN Human Rights Council on 14 March 2018.

In a speech to government officials on 7 March 2018, President Duterte also made racist remarks about Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Fatou Bensouda. The ICC opened a preliminary examination on the Philippines 'war on drugs' in February 2018. On 14 March 2018, President Duterte announced that the Philippines intended to withdraw its ratification of the Court's Statute. However, the ICC will continue to have jurisdiction to examine and prosecute alleged crimes relating to investigations started prior to the date on which the withdrawal takes effect, that is, a year after it is formally presented.

In the past weeks, the President has been reported in the media to have given direct orders to police not to cooperate with UN Special Procedures mandate holders that may visit the country, and also threatened to throw "to the crocodiles" international investigators that may probe human rights violations if they visited the Philippines.

These vicious attacks on human rights defenders are taking place amidst greater international scrutiny of the Philippines. Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Philippine authorities to allow UN Special Procedures and other international human rights investigators access into the country, to investigate alleged human rights violations. The organisation also calls on the Human Rights Council to open a UN led investigation to ensure an end to extrajudicial executions in the 'war on drugs', and to establish accountability.