

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# PHILIPPINES: DEADLY PRACTICE OF ‘RED-TAGGING’ CONTINUES UNDER MARCOS ADMINISTRATION

Amnesty International reiterates its concern over the continued practice of “red-tagging” – or accusations of links to communist groups – by government agencies and pro-government groups against human rights defenders, activists, development workers and other targeted groups under the Marcos administration.

On 13 March 2023, the government’s National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), which has previously and repeatedly labeled groups and individuals as “communists and terrorists” for being critical of the government, once again red-tagged various human rights groups and opposed the enactment of a Human Rights Defenders Protection Act. In a statement, the task force’s Legal Cooperation Cluster said the proposed legislation would create a committee composed of “Communist Terrorist Groups” that included human rights groups Karapatan and Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates, as well as lawyers’ groups the National Union of Peoples’ Lawyers and Free Legal Assistance Group.

On 4 March 2023, Vice President and Education Secretary Sara Duterte dismissed the planned week-long strike of transport and other groups as “communist-inspired”. The strike, which was suspended after just two days following a commitment by the government to review its modernization program for public utility vehicles, saw the participation of various groups and sectors, including the Alliance of Concerned Teachers, which Duterte described as a “lover” of the ideology espoused by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA).

In a February 2023 broadcast, program hosts at the pro-government Sonshine Media Network International asked if Bishop Gerardo Alminaza is a “mouthpiece” of the CPP, accusing him of taking the stance of the CPP in his own political commentary. Alminaza has been a vocal critic of human rights violations committed under the administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte and the recent spate of violence in Negros Island, including in Negros Occidental where civil society groups and the media have reported increasing human rights violations in the context of the clashes between security forces and individuals associated with the NPA.

Red-tagging intensified under the administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte, following the breakdown of peace talks between the government and CPP in 2017. This practice has led to harassment, threats, attacks, and killings of human rights defenders, political activists, lawyers, trade unionists and other targeted groups perceived to be affiliated with the left. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and various civil society organizations, including Amnesty International, have repeatedly called for the immediate end to this practice and have expressed concern that the government’s dangerously broad counter-insurgency strategy has led to an increase in threats and attacks against human rights defenders and political activists across the country.

Red-tagging has continued under the Marcos administration, despite repeated calls from UN member states to end it during a review of the Philippines’ human rights record in November 2022. In various school forums attended by members of security forces – such as at the University of the Philippines Baguio in November 2022, Saint Louis University in Baguio City on 12 March 2023, and Baguio City National High School on 1 March 2023 – students were warned against joining youth organizations that security forces had accused of being “front organizations” of the CPP, such as Anakbayan, the League of Filipino Students and the College Editors Guild of the Philippines. In February 2023, Indigenous Peoples rights defenders and activists were described as “communist terrorist group surrenderees” in a Facebook post by the Police Community Affairs and Development Group, which has since been taken down. In a resolution dated 7 December 2022 but made public on 30 January 2023, the Anti-Terrorism Council publicly designated red-tagged community doctor Natividad “Naty” Castro a “terrorist” using the dangerous Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020.

Past incidents under the previous Duterte administration point to overwhelming evidence that red-tagging leads to increasing risks to the lives and safety of those being red-tagged. In June 2019, four activists belonging to red-tagged groups were killed in a span of three days. In August 2020, peace advocate Randall Echanis and human rights defender Zara Alvarez were killed in separate incidents; both were among the hundreds of individuals that the Department of Justice (DOJ) had asked a court to declare as ‘terrorists’ in 2018, but were eventually removed from the list. In March 2021, police carried out simultaneous raids targeting leaders and members of groups in Calabarzon region that had been

red-tagged, resulting in the deaths of nine activists including labour leader Emmanuel Asuncion. In January 2023, the DOJ dismissed the murder complaint against 17 police officers over the death of Asuncion.

The Philippine government has an obligation under international human rights law to ensure the protection of human rights defenders and other critical voices at risk. Ensuring that human rights defenders and civil society activists can undertake their activities without fear of being harassed, threatened and harmed is essential to promoting and protecting human rights, which the Marcos administration has committed to doing.

In light of continuing human rights violations resulting from red-tagging of human rights defenders, activists and civil society in general, Amnesty International renews its call on the government to end the practice immediately and to cease any form of intimidation, harassment, threats or attacks against them. The government should ensure adequate protection for those who have been red-tagged and bring those responsible for threats and attacks to justice in fair trials. The Marcos administration should also publicly instruct government officials, particularly from the NTF-ELCAC, to end the harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and activists simply for exercising their rights or carrying out human rights work. Lastly, the organization calls on the government to renew its efforts to pass the Human Rights Defenders Protection Act as a crucial first step for the development of a comprehensive policy for the protection of human rights defenders at risk.