

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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PHILIPPINES: DROP MALICIOUS CASE AGAINST GOVERNMENT CRITICS

Upon the conclusion of the preliminary investigation into the sedition complaint against 36 individuals, including the vice president, Amnesty International calls on the Philippine authorities to drop the politically-motivated probe into prominent members of the political opposition, human rights lawyers and members of the church. The Duterte administration must end its campaign against those who criticise its policies, and urgently address the country's deteriorating human rights situation.

In July 2019, the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group – the primary investigative arm of the Philippine National Police — filed a complaint against 36 individuals for sedition, cyber-libel, libel, harbouring a criminal, and obstruction of justice. If found guilty, those targeted could face imprisonment of up to six years.

The allegations contained in the complaint appear to stem exclusively from the testimony of one man, Peter Joemel Advincula, who had previously surrendered to the police after producing a video series accusing President Duterte and his family of links to drugs. The government moved quickly to identify the individuals behind the videos when it was first published online in April 2019. After initially standing by his accusations, Advincula surrendered to police when he was threatened with cyber-libel charges. He then told police that his original accusations were false, and that the video series was created by key members of the Liberal Party. Those in the complaint – including Vice-President Leni Robredo, the highest-ranking member of the political opposition – are now being accused of conspiring to oust the president.

Amnesty International believes the investigation of the 36 individuals, and possible charges against them, represent yet another attempt to intimidate, harass and threaten the president's perceived opponents, particularly those who have vocally criticized the country's ongoing human rights violations. Many of these individuals have condemned the rampant abuses that have been part of the Duterte administration's 'war on drugs,' which has resulted in thousands of suspected extrajudicial executions.

The persons targeted in the complaint include prisoner of conscience Senator Leila de Lima, who has been held in arbitrary detention since her arrest on politically-motivated charges in February 2017. The probe comes amidst a wider crackdown against government critics. Individuals alleged to belong to leftist organizations have been 'red-tagged,' or named by the government as communist fronts. Many of them say that in the wake of such provocative allegations, they have faced attacks by unknown individuals.

Amnesty International calls on the Philippine authorities to stop the harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and activists, including through the misuse of the criminal justice system. The organisation also calls on the government to immediately end its probe of the 36 individuals, and instead fulfil its international obligations to ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders and activists, as guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other international standards, to which the Philippines is a party.

The charges come as the human rights situation in the Philippines has deteriorated and the authorities have come under international scrutiny. In July 2019, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to report back on the human rights situation in the country. The examination will include, among other issues, attacks on human rights defenders and peaceful activists, including members of the political opposition.

BACKGROUND

On 18 July 2019, the Philippine National Police-Criminal Investigation and Detection Group filed a sedition complaint against 36 individuals, including Vice President Leni Robredo, Senator Leila de Lima (who Amnesty has deemed a prisoner of conscience), Senator Risa Hontiveros, ex-senators Antonio Trillanes IV and Bam Aquino, prominent Catholic bishops and priests, and lawyers. Those targeted could face imprisonment of up to six years, if found guilty.

The complaint accuses the respondents of sedition, inciting to sedition, libel, and obstruction of justice. This is not the first time that charges have been filed against government critics, especially those opposing the Duterte administration's brutal 'war on drugs.'