

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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PHILIPPINES: ENSURE JUSTICE FOR ‘BLOODY SUNDAY’ KILLINGS AND OTHER ATTACKS AGAINST ACTIVISTS

Amnesty International is deeply concerned at the decision of the Department of Justice to dismiss the murder complaint against over a dozen officers of the Philippine National Police who were accused of the killing of labour rights activist Emmanuel “Manny” Asuncion. Asuncion was killed during simultaneous raids in Luzon in 2021 that also resulted in the death of eight other activists. The organization calls on the Philippine authorities to ensure thorough, independent and impartial investigations into the death of Asuncion and the other activists with a view to identifying all perpetrators and bringing them to justice in fair trials. We also urge the Marcos administration to take all necessary measures to end the escalating harassment, intimidation and attacks against activists and human rights defenders.

In a decision dated 15 October 2022 that was only received by Asuncion’s wife Liezel on 16 January 2023, a panel of prosecutors from the Department of Justice (DOJ) dismissed a murder complaint against 17 police officers citing insufficient evidence. The prosecutors stated that Liezel had failed to “directly and categorically” identify the killers, and that Asuncion resisted arrest and fought back by firing a gun at the police. The decision also reiterated that the police operation – supposedly to serve arrest warrants against the activists but which resulted in the death of nine people and the arrest of several others – was “legitimate”.

Amnesty International believes the deadly raids were politically motivated, targeting leaders and members of groups that have been “red-tagged” or accused of links with communist groups. Asuncion was among the nine activists killed during simultaneous “Bloody Sunday” raids by the police in the provinces of Cavite, Batangas and Rizal on 7 March 2021. Together with Asuncion, the couple Chai Lemita-Evangelista and Ariel Evangelista were also killed; their 10-year-old child reportedly saw how the two were dragged out of their cottage and brought to another house where he heard gunshots. In January 2022, the National Bureau of Investigation filed a murder complaint against over a dozen police officers for the death of the Evangelista couple, currently under preliminary investigation also by the DOJ. The other deaths were reportedly being investigated as of last year, but there has been no new information on these cases to date.

Testimonies on the killing of Asuncion state that he was shot dead by the police in Dasmarias City, Cavite, an hour away from his house, which was the actual subject of the arrest warrant. His wife Liezel, who filed the complaint, said the police officers involved were wearing uniform but with their faces and nameplates covered, and then dragged Asuncion away from her after gunshots were heard. The body of Asuncion was then found with six bullets in his body. In recent days, Dr. Raquel Fortun, the country’s leading forensic pathologist who carried out Asuncion’s autopsy, said that the DOJ panel “twisted” her forensic report which concluded that Asuncion’s killing may be a case of homicide.

The “Bloody Sunday” killings happened just two days after former President Rodrigo Duterte ordered security forces to “kill” and “finish off” communist rebels, and to “forget about human rights”. The manner in which Asuncion was killed resembled the way in which thousands of people have been killed during anti-drug operations, in which the police targets were killed by the police allegedly for “fighting back”. Various human rights groups, including Amnesty International, have evidenced the way in which this self-defence narrative by the police is often false and used as a strategy to perpetrate extrajudicial executions.

Since the Marcos administration took power in June 2022, attacks against activists and human rights defenders have escalated once again. On 13 January 2023, development workers Dyan Gumanao and Armand Jake Dayoha were abducted in Cebu City. They were found three days later after their abductors reportedly left them at a resort some 40 kilometres away from where they had been abducted. In a 22 January press conference-, Gumanao and Dayoha said their captors subjected them to “psychological and emotional torture”; moved them from one place to another while handcuffed, blindfolded, and sometimes gagged; and told them they were taken because they are “activists”. They also said their captors repeatedly identified themselves as police and threatened to turn them over to other units of a “task force” for execution if they did not talk about their ties with “terrorist groups”. Their families have sought the assistance of the Philippines’ Commission on Human Rights to investigate their abduction and have called on the police and local authorities in Cebu to also conduct their own investigation. Gumanao and Dayoha have also said they are planning to bring their case to Philippine courts and international bodies to hold security forces accountable for their disappearance.

In November 2022, activists Ericson Acosta and Joseph Jimenez were found dead in Negros Occidental province. They were allegedly abducted by the Philippine Army but according to the army, the bodies of Acosta and Jimenez were recovered after a clash between the armed forces and rebels from the New People's Army. Amnesty International is not aware of any investigation to have been carried out into their deaths.

Amnesty International strongly urges the Philippine government to conduct effective, thorough, impartial and independent investigations into the "Bloody Sunday" raids to identify the perpetrators of the killing of Asuncion and eight other activists, as well as for the killings of Acosta and Jimenez and the abduction of Gumanao and Dayoha to bring all those responsible to justice in fair trials. The authorities must ensure that the investigations enquire if the motive behind the killings, abductions and other attacks were connected to their human rights work. The authorities must also look into whether or not the use of lethal force was lawful during the police raids and ensure that all law enforcement authorities comply at all times with international standards on the use of force. Finally, the Marcos administration must urgently work to put an end to the increasing attacks, harassment and intimidation against activists and human rights defenders and ensure that they can work in a safe and enabling environment without fear of reprisals.