

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACE BRUTAL CRACKDOWN

On 22 April, Cristina Palabay of Philippines-based human rights alliance Karapatan received a text message from an unidentified person, sent to her personal number, warning her and several other individuals that they are targeted to be killed this year. Amid the threats against Palabay, on 30 May the Supreme Court directed the government to give access to information of Palabay and other human rights defenders in hope to protect their right to life, liberty and security.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Police General Oscar Albayalde
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Dear General Albayalde,

I am writing to express my concern over death threats received by prominent human rights defender in the Philippines, **Cristina Palabay**. Cristina is the secretary general of Karapatan, a coalition of several human rights groups and individuals.

On 6 May, Karapatan, along with women's rights group Gabriela and religious group Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, filed a petition to seek legal protection from threats to life, liberty, privacy and security. On 30 May, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of these groups and issued a writ of *amparo* and *habeas data* – protection and access to information, respectively, and named a Philippine National Police directorate as one of the respondents. The groups noted in their petition that they have been threatened, harassed, and intimidated after government authorities accused them of being “communist fronts.”

On 22 April, Cristina Palabay received a text message from an unidentified person sent to her personal number, warning her and several other human rights defenders that they are targeted to be killed this year. The threats were all the more alarming as they came just a few hours after another human rights defender, Bernardino Patigas, was gunned down in broad daylight in Escalante City, Negros Occidental province. The killing of Patigas and the threats against Palabay and other human rights defenders come amid what appears to be an increasingly deadlier campaign against human rights defenders and political activists.

I urge your office to act swiftly to promote and protect the rights of human rights defenders in the country. Specifically, I call on you to:

- Open a prompt, thorough, independent, impartial and effective investigation into the death threats against Cristina Palabay and other human rights defenders in the country, and bring those responsible to justice in fair trials;
- Put in place effective mechanisms to protect human rights defenders at risk in consultation with them, and ensure they are able to carry out their work without fear of reprisals; and
- Launch a thorough, independent, impartial and effective investigation into the killings of human rights defenders and bring all those responsible to justice in fair trials.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

By issuing a writ of *amparo* and *habeas data*, the Supreme Court has directed the government to verify the alleged violations and provide information of actions it has taken to investigate the case. This further requires the respondents to disclose any information unlawfully collected or obtained. Respondents – which include Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and the military, intelligence, and other government officials – need to respond by 13 June; the Court of Appeals will then hear the petition on 18 June.

Patigas is the second human rights defender killed who was on a supposed 'hit list' disseminated by unknown individuals in Negros Occidental in 2018. The list, reported by Philippine media, asked the general public to report through a specified phone number the whereabouts of these people, putting their lives at great risk. Also, reportedly on the said list was human rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos who was killed in November 2018. Dozens of other human rights defenders and activists, including environmental defenders, have also been killed since June 2016, as reported by various media outlets and human rights groups within and outside the country. All these point to the gravity of the threats against Palabay and other activists.

According to Karapatan, at least 50 farm workers and human rights defenders in the Negros region have been killed since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in July 2016. The number includes Bernardino Patigas, who was gunned down on 22 April 2019, as he was leaving an election-related activity in Escalante City, Negros Occidental, where he was seeking re-election as member of the city council. Patigas was the founder and secretary-general of North Negros Alliance for Human Rights Advocates, a member-organization of the human rights alliance Karapatan.

According to Karapatan records, 48 human rights defenders belonging to the group have been killed since 2016. Patigas is the second human rights defender killed who was on a supposed 'hit list' distributed by unknown individuals in Negros Occidental in early 2018; the first was human rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos, who was killed in November 2018. The Philippine National Police has ordered an investigation into the killing of Ramos, but has yet to release its findings.

Human rights organizations in the Philippines, including Karapatan, have faced smear campaigns and have been tagged by the government as fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines. This characterisation and the increased threats against them from the government have subjected them to intimidation, harassment, attacks and killings, by unknown individuals.

Many of the organizations linked by the government to communist groups have criticised the Duterte administration's so-called 'war on drugs', which has resulted in the extrajudicial execution of thousands of people suspected of using or selling drugs, mostly from poor communities.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English, Filipino

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 23 July 2019

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Cristina Palabay (she/her)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/0273/2019/en/>