

The Beaconsfield Initiative

Defend Human Rights!

Stop all Aid to the Philippine Military and Police!

Stop the Killings!

ICHRP Canada Statement for International Human Rights Day 2019

In 2019, the Philippines has continued its slide towards authoritarianism, placing human rights defenders, government critics, and all those working to improve the lives of ordinary Filipinos in grave danger. As we mark International Human Rights Day, we denounce the human rights tragedy that we see unfolding in the Philippines. Every day the situation appears to become graver with new measures by the Duterte Regime to oppress, harass, and murder social and human rights activists. Martial Law has effectively been expanded beyond Mindanao to cover many areas of the Central Philippines including Negros, Samar, Leyte and Southern Luzon. The apparatus of the government under Duterte is increasingly controlled and coordinated by military and ex-military officials giving it a junta character similar to the brutal regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Many Filipinos are worried the Duterte government is laying the ground for open authoritarian rule with its “shoot-to-kill” and arbitrary arrest policies. Political and drug related killings and arbitrary arrests continued unabated through 2019.

Amnesty International reported in July of this year that in the three years since President Rodrigo Duterte unleashed the crackdown almost 27,000 people have been killed in either police anti drug operations or by unknown perpetrators. In addition, Karapatan reported that over 1,000 civilians were killed in military actions related to the War on Terror in Marawi City; over 222 political killings; 111 documented instances of torture; 85,236 victims of threat, harassment and intimidation; 368,391 who have suffered due to indiscriminate firing and aerial bombing; and 447,963 internally displaced who were subject to forced evacuation (Dec. 10, 2018).

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2019 was a year where the international community has finally stood up and taken notice of the Philippines human rights catastrophe. On July 12th, the UN Commission on Human Rights voted on a resolution by Iceland to conduct an independent investigation on the Duterte regime's war on drugs. The resolution requested that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, prepare and present a "comprehensive written report" on the human rights situation in the Philippines. To protect itself from accountability the Duterte Regime has now withdrawn from the Rome Statute¹ and the International Criminal Court. In the past 12 months we have seen:

- Mass arrests of around 60 peasants, women, trade union and other activists in Negros and Manila following searches of their offices on dubious pretexts (October 31st, 2019)
- The October 23rd killing of seven minors in a joint military and police operation in Mindanao. While the military claimed they were members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, relatives claimed they were minors falsely branded as child soldiers.
- The September 22nd ambush and killing of two abaca farmers in Panganiban in Southern Luzon by members of the 9th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army. One of the victims, Lito Aguilar, was fishing for his wedding feast, which was to take place two days hence. Negros has seen a particular spike in human rights violations in 2019.
- On March 14 individuals primarily farmer activists were killed in joint police military operations. In July, a further 17 civilians were killed over a 10-day period between July 18 and July 28th. Most of the victims were in their homes when armed men attacked them in the wee hours of the morning. According to the human rights

¹ The Rome Statute established four core international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.

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group “Defend Negros” there have been at least 84 political killings in Negros since 2017. These killings have spiked since the government instituted de facto Martial Law on the Island in November 2018. The acceleration in Human Rights violations, red-tagging, trumped up charges, weaponizing of the law against critics, opposition are all components of the government’s “whole of nation approach” under Executive Order #70. What remains of the peace process between the National Democratic Front (NDFP) and the Philippine government has also been under attack by the Duterte Regime.

- Journalist and NDFP peace consultant, Randy Malayo, was assassinated while asleep on a bus in Nueva Viscaya (January 30, 2019) by suspected military agents.
- The Philippine government continue to arrest those formerly involved in the Peace process in violation of its own commitments. The arrest of NDFP peace consultants Winona Birondo, her husband Alexander Birondo,(July 24, 2019) and Esterlita Suaybaguio (August 26, 2019) served as additional blows to any remaining hope for the peace process. In December 2018 the Congress granted Duterte a 3rd extension of military rule in Mindanao to the end of 2019.
- Under Martial Law in Mindanao Duterte has closed all indigenous schools in Mindanao, in early October of the this year the last 55 schools in Davao with 3500 students were shuttered by the department of education.
- There were more troop and police deployments to reinforce counterinsurgency operations in Samar, Negros and Bicol provinces through 2019 virtually putting these under martial rule as in Mindanao. Judicial harassment of the opposition continued throughout 2019
- Opposition parties and candidates such as Bayan Muna were red-tagged and harassed during the May elections,
- This followed 700 activists in Mindanao being slapped with trumped-up charges on December 8, 2018.

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Journalism is under attack. The owners of the formerly independent broadsheet, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, were forced to sell last year to a Duterte ally. The independent news service, Rappler, has been under constant attack. Earlier this year its editor, Marie Ressa, was jailed in March over trumped-up tax evasion charges following Rappler's in-depth reporting on the War on Drugs.

Those who oppose the Duterte regime continue to be tagged as terrorists. In March 2018, over 600 individuals were identified as terrorists by the Philippine government. The long list tagged as "terrorists" include NGO representatives, peace proponents, human rights advocates, UN personnel, and Indigenous Peoples' representatives. Attacks on human rights defenders intensified across the Philippines during 2018-19. According to the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (NUPL), 34 lawyers have been killed in the Philippines over the two-year reign of President Duterte (including judges and prosecutors). Meanwhile, the influence of the Philippine military is now fully established in both the Cabinet and senior civil service posts. The majority of senior cabinet positions is now occupied by ex military and police, giving the Duterte Regime increasingly the look of a military dictatorship. We are alarmed at the new level of impunity and the deterioration of the rights situation and democratic spaces. The Duterte government's track record regarding human rights and democracy is alarming. Its campaign to weaken any opposition to its authority is characterized by the same scale and ruthlessness with which it wages the brutal drug war. In both its wars on drugs and on political opposition, the Duterte government is running rough shod over human rights and the rule of law, sanctioning the use of extra-legal means, including extrajudicial killings. It has weaponized the legal system against its political opponents, critics of its policies and human rights defenders. Martial Law is virtually in place all across the country, not just in Mindanao. Since it assumed power in 2016, the

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Duterte government has systematically and rapidly disabled and dismantled the country's democratic systems and institutions.

Despite Canada's declaration that human rights is core to its foreign policy and its commitment to support efforts in the Philippines to "advance inclusive and accountable governance, diversity, human rights, and the rule of law", its response to the Duterte government's attack on human rights and democracy has been timid. There has been no clear and strong statement from the Canadian government about its position and concerns regarding the state of human rights and democracy in the Philippines. Canada's recent support for Iceland's resolution on the situation in the Philippines approved in the United Nations Human Rights Council was a welcome development. Canada's guidelines to support human rights defenders around the world provides practical tools for Canadian diplomats working around the world to protect and support human rights defenders who seek help. Yet, reports received by ICHRP do not show that these tools are being utilized on the ground to defend and support human rights defenders, especially those who bear the brunt of the attacks from the Duterte government, including many who are the targets of vicious vilification campaigns and facing acute risk to their lives.