

Philippines: Take Concrete Steps to Protect Land and Environmental Defenders

(Bangkok, 31 July 2019) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) expresses its utmost concern regarding recent findings by Global Witness, an international human rights organisation, proclaiming the Philippines as the deadliest country for land and environmental defenders. The Government of the Philippines must: take concrete steps to provide protection to all human rights defenders, specifically land and environmental defenders; ensure that businesses respects human rights; and immediately halt all forms of all reprisals against those that attempt to stand up for human rights.

On 30 July 2019, Global Witness released its 2019 Annual Report, ‘Enemies of the State’,¹ which recorded 30 deaths in 2018 in the Philippines. This makes the Philippines the country with the highest number of killings worldwide, replacing Brazil. Of the killings in the Philippines, half were related to agribusiness, reflecting the increasing role of the business sector in the risks faced by environmental defenders and indigenous communities.

FORUM-ASIA own recent report, ‘Defending in Numbers – Resistance in the Face of Repression 2017-2018’, also found that 48 per cent of total killings documented occurred in the Philippines, making it the country with the highest number of deaths of human rights defenders in Asia.²

The killing of land and environmental defenders occur within a pervasive culture of impunity, and at a time when the Government increasingly vilifies human rights defenders for their work. In July 2019, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution mandating the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to produce a comprehensive report on the human rights situation in the Philippines. The resolution came in response to an estimated 27,000 deaths resulting from the Government’s ‘war on drugs,’ and increasing restrictions on the work of civil society in the country.

In previous weeks, at least 20 individuals, including a human rights lawyer, have been killed in the central Philippines island of Negros.³ Human rights defenders continue to face forms of intimidation and reprisals, including violence, for the work they do. Land and environmental defenders, as well as indigenous communities particularly face threats from businesses, private armies and the security sector.

The Global Witness report also highlights the increased use of criminalisation to target land and environmental defenders. FORUM-ASIA has documented the use of repressive laws against legitimate human rights work within the region, in efforts to stifle fundamental freedoms and constrict civic space.⁴

¹ <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/enemies-state/>

² <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=28887>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/29/world/asia/philippines-negros-killings-duterte.html>

⁴ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=28225>

Judicial harassment is a tactic used against human rights defenders to undermine their work. Between 2017 and 2018, 2,307 human rights defenders were affected by judicial harassment, according to FORUM-ASIA's documentation, while environmental defenders were the second highest group of defenders targeted (59 cases).⁵

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of the Philippines to:

- Take genuine steps to ensure the protection of all land, environmental and human rights defenders;
- Ensure that all laws comply with international human rights standards, that any repressive laws that criminalise human rights defenders are repealed and judicial processes remain just and transparent;
- Investigate human rights abuses against human rights defenders, and hold all perpetrators accountable for their actions;
- Undertake measures to: prevent human rights defenders from being harmed by creating an enabling environment for them to carry out their work, protect them from harm by creating a national legal framework for their protection, and provide effective remedies when they are at risk; and
- Cooperate with the OHCHR in its human rights report on the Philippines, and prevent all forms of intimidation and reprisals against stakeholders who cooperate with the UN Human Rights Council and its mechanisms.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 81 member organisations in 21 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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⁵ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=28887>