

**Press release**  
**10 December 2019**

**Assault on human rights defenders in the Philippines at crisis point**

As we mark the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it is, we firmly believe, as relevant today as it was when it was adopted 71 years ago.

Human rights defenders, environmental activists, indigenous peoples rights defenders, lawyers and journalists in the country are facing unprecedented levels of persecution, intimidation and violence, warned Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP)\* <https://tfdp.net/> today as it launched its Human Rights Defenders Summit 2019 in Cebu City demanding an end to the assault on human rights defenders.

The government authorities should take immediate and effective action to end widespread assault against human rights defenders, the TFDP said today in a press conference in Cebu City.

The situation for human rights defenders in the country is becoming increasingly challenging as elaborated in various reports made by regional and international human rights organizations such as Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia), Global Witness, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (OMCT), International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and Front Line Defenders.

Democratic backsliding, deterioration of the quality of democracy, and shrinking democratic space has become one of the defining features of Duterte's regime.

In July 2016, when Duterte assumed presidency and started his campaign against illegal drugs through "Oplan Tokhang", TFDP responded by documenting the cases of extra-judicial killings and other human rights violations related to government's war on drugs. The authorities admit 6,600 people have been killed over the last three years though other groups estimate as many as 29,000 have lost their lives. The authorities claim that those killed fought back or resisted arrest (or "nanlaban", ignoring case after case in which witnesses says suspects were summarily executed.

On many occasions, Duterte publicly voiced his blatant disregard for human rights in relation to his 'war on drugs' and repeatedly threatened to kill human rights activists (defenders).

"What we are witnessing today here in Visayas, based on our documentation, from 2018 to December 2019, there are 104 documented cases of human rights violations, breakdown as follows: 31 cases are related to harassments, intimidation, vilification and killings against human rights defenders including the killing of human rights lawyer Benjamin Ramos on 6 November 2018 at Kabankalan City, Negros Occidental and red-tagging of our organization by authorities in Bacolod City; 58 cases related to government's war on drugs while 15 are politically motivated cases," TFDP claimed.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Memorandum Circular No. 15 (s. 2018) mandates all non-profit organizations in the Philippines to comply with arbitrary and invasive registration requirements.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/04/10/1908888/german-ngo-network-concerned-safety-local-partners>

This SEC memorandum comes amidst increasing government pressure on civil society, and allegations of surveillance targeting human rights defenders. The memorandum will further legitimize the invasion of privacy of individuals, and hinder the capacity of organizations to do their legitimate human rights work.

TFDP demands that the government implement what they committed to when the United Nations adopted the Declaration on human rights defenders in 1998. The Declaration calls on states to recognize the key role and contribution of those who defend human rights and to establish effective measures to protect them such as enactment of the Human Rights Defenders Protection Law.

"We are living in dangerous times again and many seem not to bother nor care that the whimsical and capricious display of vindictiveness of Duterte is eating the nation's soul and trampling on people's rights," said Fr. Christian Buenafe, O.Carm, chairperson of TFDP.

What the martial law experience taught us is that when "injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty," TFDP concluded.-end-

\*TFDP is a Mission Partner of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP) established in 1974. TFDP is a member of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum Asia) and SOS Torture Network of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT).

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