

[Statement] The Philippines: Protect environmental defenders, ensure safe return of Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano

(Bangkok, 13 September 2023) The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the [alleged abduction](#) of Filipino environmental defenders, Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano. FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of the Philippines to thoroughly investigate the case and ensure the safe return of both defenders.

Jonila and Jhed—ages 21 and 22—are community volunteers for *Akap Ka* Manila Bay, a group opposing reclamation projects in Manila Bay. Prior to their disappearance, the two activists had been advocating for the welfare of fishing communities affected by such projects. As volunteers, they [were sent](#) to Orion in the Bataan province to consult with communities impacted by the new coastal road and reclamation project intended for the expansion of the free port of Bataan.

On 2 September 2023, Jonila and Jhed were allegedly abducted by armed men in Barangay Lati of Orion. Prior to the alleged abduction, both Jonila and Jhed have reportedly experienced intimidation and harassment.

For nine consecutive years, the Philippines has been ranked as the '[deadliest country](#) in Asia for land and environmental defenders.'

A fact-finding mission led by civil society organisations, including [Karapatan](#)—a FORUM-ASIA member organisation in the Philippines—found that 'there is possible involvement of State actors in the abduction of Jonila and Jhed, as they have the motives, means and opportunity to do so and especially considering previous reported threats of a soldier against Jonila.'

'The two young women environmental defenders were abducted in a violent manner, as witnessed by those in the community. A sandal and a pair of slippers left behind show that Jonila and Jhed had tried to resist their abductors,' Karapatan said.

On 7 September, [the Philippine Commission on Human Rights](#) dispatched a quick response operation to look into the alleged abduction, pointing out the susceptibility of activists to enforced disappearances.

As of 12 September, the whereabouts of Jonila and Jhed remain unknown.

Call to Action

'FORUM-ASIA is in solidarity with Jonila, Jhed, their loved ones, and all environmental defenders in the Philippines. It is disturbing to see that just two days after from the commemoration of International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearances—which was established to draw attention to the fate of individuals detained in brutal conditions and in

places unknown to their loved ones—the list of abducted persons under the current Marcos Jr. administration continues to grow,’ said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

‘The Philippines is the sole Asian country that has a strong domestic law against enforced disappearances whose many provisions are in line with the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. It is ironic that despite the Republic Act 10353 or the Anti-Enforced Disappearance Act of 2012 signed by the late President Benigno Aquino III, cases of enforced disappearances continue and past cases remain unresolved,’ Bacalso stressed.

‘The practice of enforced disappearances has frequently been employed in the Philippines to silence individuals who demand justice and change as well as those who genuinely serve the needs of the people. Breaking the cycle of forced disappearances is crucial,’ Bacalso added.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Philippine Government to immediately search for Jonila and Jhed, exhausting all efforts from law enforcement agencies to ensure their safe return. We also urge the government to conduct independent investigations into the incident in aid of its oversight functions on the implementation of the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act of 2012.

In addition, FORUM-ASIA reminds the Government of the Philippines to respect the people’s right to a healthy environment—as enshrined in the Constitution of the Philippines—which entrusts the State to ‘protect and advance the right of the people to a balanced and healthful ecology in accord with the rhythm and harmony of nature (Article II, Section 16).’ Finally, we call on the government to strengthen the protection of the rights of environmental defenders—including their safety and security against reprisals—and to take decisive actions and ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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