



## Joint Statement: President of the Philippines should be held accountable for attacks against human rights defenders

(11 January 2019, Bangkok) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and its member organisations in the Philippines strongly condemn Philippine President Duterte’s recent tirades against human rights groups. In a speech delivered on 9 January 2019, he accused human rights groups of being ‘enemies of the Government’.<sup>1</sup> Such comments only distort the concept of human rights, and the role of human rights defenders within an already repressive environment. FORUM-ASIA strongly urges the President to retract his comments and to stop any stigmatisation campaigns targeting human rights defenders and groups that can incite violence. We also urge the international community to hold President Duterte accountable for his continuous threats of killings and attacks against human rights defenders.

In his speech, President Duterte said that human rights groups have not spoken out against crimes committed by drug addicts and criminals, and accused them of trying to destroy the Government. His accusations refer to the continuous criticism of human rights groups on President Duterte’s ‘war on drugs’, which has a death toll estimated to be in the tens of thousands.<sup>2</sup>

Human rights defenders have consistently spoken out against crimes committed by non-state actors. Many groups working on human rights and development actively work in advocacy or service delivery for victims of such crimes.

The speech follows a series of verbal attacks by President Duterte against human rights defenders. He has previously threatened to behead them, and to order the police to shoot them for ‘obstructing justice’.<sup>3</sup> He has blamed them for the increase in the number of drug addicts, reinforcing misleading and

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<sup>1</sup>Duterte: Human rights groups out to destroy gov’t, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1071390/duterte-human-rights-groups-out-to-destroy-govt>

<sup>2</sup> CHR chief: Drug war deaths could be as high as 27,000, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/12/05/18/chr-chief-drug-war-deaths-could-be-as-high-as-27000>

<sup>3</sup> Duterte threatens to behead human rights advocates, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/611343/duterte-threatens-to-behead-human-rights-advocates/story/>; Human rights group slams Philippines president Duterte’s threat to kill them, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/17/human-rights-watch-philippines-president-duterte-threat>.

dangerous beliefs on the nature of drug use.<sup>4</sup> Such statements further aggravate the situation of human rights defenders who continue to face threats and violence. They reinforce the onslaught of both state and non-state sponsored attacks against human rights defenders and democratic institutions, and normalise a culture of violence and impunity in the country.

President Duterte, as the leader of a democratic country, has the obligation to protect and promote the rights of all. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, the Philippines is obliged to comply with human rights standards. FORUM-ASIA urges the international community to condemn the Philippine President's continuous attacks against human rights defenders. In his 2018 World Report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, recently urged the Philippine Government to cease public stigmatisation against human rights defenders, and to publicly recognise the legitimacy of their work.<sup>5</sup> We further urge the UN Human Rights Council to mandate an investigation into the Philippine Government's incitement of violence, including under its so-called 'war on drugs', hold perpetrators accountable, and monitor the Government's steps toward authoritarianism. As the date for the Philippines withdrawal from the International Criminal Court draws closer, the UN Human Rights Council's role in holding states accountable for human rights violations and abuses becomes even more crucial.

### **Signatories**

Balaod Mindanaw

Dakila: Philippine Coalition for Modern Heroism

KARAPATAN: Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights

Philippine Alliance for Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)

Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP)

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<sup>4</sup> Duterte threatens to kill human rights activist, <http://time.com/4584478/dutere-threatens-to-kill-human-rights-activists/>

<sup>5</sup> UN Expert tells Philippine Government to stop Stigma against Human Rights Defenders, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/219213-un-expert-tells-philippine-government-stop-stigma-against-human-rights-defenders>