

Philippines: Government should end the systematic red-tagging of human rights defenders

(Bangkok, 23 June 2020) – The recent red-tagging of Balaod Mindanaw Executive Director Ritz Lee Santos III and other human rights defenders demonstrates the significant threats they continue to face under Duterte’s administration, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said today.

A Facebook post circulated over the weekend claimed that Santos, along with other human rights defenders and activists who had protested against the Anti-Terrorism Bill, were connected to the Communist Party of the Philippines – New People’s Army (CPP-NPA). President Duterte declared the CPP-NPA as a terrorist group in 2017.¹

‘The inaccurate portrayal of Santos and other human rights defenders as members of the CPP-NPA is irresponsible and dangerous. This does not only endanger the security of these individuals, but also contributes to a culture of impunity. The Government should cease its systematic use of red-tagging to discredit human rights defenders immediately,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, FORUM-ASIA Executive Director.

Throughout Duterte’s regime, human rights defenders and activists have consistently faced ‘red-tagging’, the practice of connecting individuals to the CPP-NPA to discredit their advocacy. The Government has promoted red-tagging through policies such as Executive Order No. 70, which pushed for a ‘whole of nation’ approach towards addressing insurgency. This policy gave the security sector the justification to conduct surveillance on organisations, raid offices and intimidate human rights defenders.

Duterte’s consistent verbal attacks against human rights defenders has fostered an environment where civil society finds itself at risk of attacks by both state and non-state actors. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ report on the Philippines highlighted that at least 248 human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists were killed in relation to their work in the country between 2015 and 2018.²

From mid-2016 – when President Duterte took office – to 2019, FORUM-ASIA documented 39 killings of human rights defenders. Community-based defenders, including land and indigenous people’s rights defenders, were the most targeted group.

¹ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/190457-duterte-proclamation-communist-party-philippines-new-peoples-army-terrorist-group>

² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25924&LangID=E>

Many human rights organisations including FORUM-ASIA members Karapatan, the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) and the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP) have also been subjected to the practice of red-tagging and various forms of reprisals by the State.

Balaod Mindanaw, Santos' organisation and FORUM-ASIA member, provides legal assistance to marginalised communities in Mindanao, and promotes their participation in governance. These same communities are likely to face the adverse impact of the Anti-Terrorism Bill once it is signed into law.

'The practice of red-tagging is precisely why civil society is campaigning against the passage of this Anti-Terrorism Bill. Once approved by the President, it would legitimise the use of reprisals against human rights defenders, and particularly, the vulnerable communities they work with,' said Shamini.

Santos is also a member of the International Board of Amnesty International, a treasurer for environmental organisation Tanggol Kalikasan and an individual member of the Philippine Coalition for the International Criminal Court (PCICC). He has actively campaigned against state policies detrimental to human rights and advocated for the rights of vulnerable communities.

The Government should put an immediate end to the red-tagging of human rights defenders and rights organisations. Civil society must be ensured the right to exercise their fundamental freedoms, free from fear of reprisals.

About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a Bangkok-based regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. 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 sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu.

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