

The Government of the Philippines must end the killings of human rights activists and defenders

(Bangkok, 19 August 2020) – The Philippine government should immediately end the killings of activists and human rights defenders and ensure credible, transparent investigations and accountability for the lives which have been lost, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said in a statement today.

Human rights activist Zara Alvarez was gunned down on the evening of 17 August in Bacolod City while on her way home.¹ Alvarez worked as the research and advocacy officer of the Negros Island Health Integrated Program, and was the former Campaign and Education Director of the Negros chapter of human rights network Karapatan. She is the 13th Karapatan member to have been killed under the current administration.

‘The endless killings of activists in the Philippines have become systematic in Duterte’s regime, and demonstrate the continuing impunity in the country. The government should end these killings immediately and take genuine steps towards ensuring justice for victims and their family members,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, Executive Director at FORUM-ASIA.

A week prior, on 10 August, peace consultant and labour activist, Randy Echanis was stabbed and killed in his home in Quezon City.² Echanis was also the chair of Anakpawis, a party-list advocating for the rights of workers.

Alvarez and Echanis were both included in the Philippine Department of Justice’s (DOJ) list of individuals in its petition for terrorist proscription in 2018.³ The list included human rights defenders and activists, and a UN Special Rapporteur. While the DOJ eventually revised this list and removed their names, Alvarez, Echanis, and other human rights activists were still targets of unknown perpetrators.

Terrorist tagging or ‘red-tagging’ has become increasingly common in the Philippines under Duterte’s regime. The President and country’s leaders have branded human rights defenders as enemies of the people who incite violence against civil society. State agencies and the security sector have shared lists that frame activists or civil society organisations as threats to national security.

Alvarez and Echanis’ murders demonstrate how red-tagging endangers the lives of human rights workers in the country who are doing legitimate work.

From 2017 to 2019, FORUM-ASIA has recorded 95 violations against human rights defenders in the Philippines, making this the highest number of violations in Asia, with violence, judicial harassment, intimidation and threats being the most common violations. Within this period, 39 human rights

¹ <https://rappler.com/nation/activist-zara-alvarez-shot-dead-august-17-2020>

² <https://rappler.com/nation/anakpawis-chair-randy-echanis-killed-inside-quezon-city-home>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-rebels/philippines-seeks-terrorist-tag-for-600-alleged-communist-guerrillas-idUSKCN1GK0DO>

defenders from the country were killed.⁴ The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' report detailed attacks faced by human rights defenders in the country as they strive to hold the Government accountable.⁵

'These incessant killings prove that despite international scrutiny, the Philippine government has failed to protect activists and human rights defenders, and have reinforced a culture of complete impunity' said Shamini.

In the absence of any willingness by the government to pursue credible accountability for these killings, international accountability measures are essential to hold perpetrators of these killings to account. FORUM-ASIA calls on the UN Human Rights Council to urgently mandate an international investigative mechanism in the Philippines to address the wide-scale violations, including the extrajudicial killings related to the 'war on drugs' and the continuous attacks against activists and human rights defenders.

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. www.forum-asia.org

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⁴ For more information, please see the [Asian Human Rights Defender Portal](#)

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25924&LangID=E>