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STOP THE ATTACKS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS!

Dear friends,

We would like to seek your help and support to demand from the Duterte government to put a halt to the series of vilification and smear campaigns against Karapatan, Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, Ibon Foundation, alternative learning centers for indigenous children in Mindanao, and other people's organizations, under its counterinsurgency program Oplan Kapayapaan (Operational Plan Peace). The latest of said campaigns are government-instigated activities under President Rodrigo Duterte's Executive Order No. 70 issued last December 4, 2018, which created a "National Task Force (NTF) to end local communist armed conflict."

Karapatan is a non-stock, non-profit, non-governmental organization that has conducted human rights advocacy, monitoring and documentation in the Philippines since 1995. It is a member of the Civicus World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the SOS-Torture Network of the World Organization Against Torture, and, recently, of FORUM-ASIA. Its officers are involved in various feminist platforms such as the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development.

IBON Foundation is a non-stock, non-profit development organization that has conducted research and education since 1978. The Rural Missionaries of the Philippines is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, inter-diocesan and inter-congregational in character of men and women religious, priests and lay, founded in 1969. It acts as the mission partners of the Association of the Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP). The Mindanao Interfaith Service Foundation is a non-stock, non-profit, religious institution serving the marginalized Lumad, Muslim and Christians in Mindanao, founded in 1983.

Karapatan condemns the NTF's reported conduct starting in February 2019 in Europe, where military and intelligence officials made rounds among diplomatic missions to wrongfully label and vilify the aforementioned Philippine human rights organizations as terrorists and communist fronts. We view such actions as clear reprisals on our human rights work, specifically on our advocacies and reports regarding the dismal human rights situation under the Duterte administration. The government's repeated denial instead of initiating investigations and addressing the issue have reinforced the actions of human rights violators and enabled gross impunity in the country.

Such acts are also meant to dissuade international actors from providing resources to human rights work, research and humanitarian support for the said organizations and their communities. This situation imperils the many efforts of human rights defenders and various organizations to access and inform the international community on cases of rights violations and the over-all human rights situation in the Philippines and their initiatives to provide services for marginalized indigenous, peasant and urban poor communities.

More so, these forms of terrorist-labelling and red-tagging have resulted in the killings of human rights defenders, criminalization of their work and beliefs, illegal arrests and detention, torture and other violations of the people's right to uphold and defend rights,

to form organizations and to conduct human rights work. In his 2008 Report to the UN Human Rights Council, UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Killings Prof. Philip Alston has recommended that the Philippine government should desist from such forms of vilification as it has resulted to such grave violations.

It is ironic that such difficult situations continue to exist despite Prof. Alston's recommendations, which have remained largely unheeded by succeeding administrations. It is also ironic that these forms of attacks continue despite the years of existence of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders and the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.

These attacks are in the context of the extrajudicial killings spawned by the government's drug war and counter-insurgency campaigns, the political persecution of vocal critics of the Duterte government such as Sen. Leila de Lima and former Supreme Court Justice Marilou Sereno, the attacks on press freedom as exemplified by the arrest and detention of Rappler's Maria Ressa and cyber-attacks against online news sites, the martial law declaration in Mindanao, the state of emergency declared in three regions in the Philippines enabling more military presence in communities, attempts to legislate laws that undermine human rights, militarization of the civilian bureaucracy and more recently, the issuance of Securities and Exchange Commission Memorandum 15 arbitrarily classifying and regulating the operations of non-profit organizations in the Philippines. These smear and vilification campaigns contribute to the over-all trend of shrinking civil society space and the worsening of the climate of impunity in the Philippines.

We enjoin you to release statements of support for these organizations and to call on the Duterte government to stop such attacks and vilification campaigns constituting of false, baseless, and malicious allegations against staunch advocates of human rights. Finally, we are calling for your support in pursuing initiatives of civil society, governments and intergovernmental bodies in conducting independent investigations on the human rights situation in the Philippines.

Accounts of the incidents:

On December 4, 2019, President Rodrigo Duterte signed Executive Order No. 70, creating a national task force (NTF) to end local communist armed conflict and institutionalizing the so-called whole of nation approach.¹ In February 2019, the NTF and other government officials went on a trip in Europe.

On February 14, 2019, the said Philippine government delegation went to Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina for a reported meeting with the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance.² In the sidelines of the said meeting, Brig. Gen. Antonio Parlade, Jr., assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, said³: *“Yung pinanggalingan ng data eh may ibang interes, may ibang agenda. It's really to destroy the government. And we believe, talagang ganun kasi, ah kasi nakita na natin yang trend na yan, information coming from Ibon, from Karapatan – these are all organizations of the Communist Party of the Philippines.” (The sources of data have other interests and agenda, that is to really destroy government. We believe that it is so because we already saw the trend where information is coming from, from Ibon, from Karapatan, these are all organizations of the Communist Party of the Philippines.)*

On February 18, 2019, the said delegation reportedly went to Brussels, Belgium to meet with Belgian government officials, members of the European Union Parliament and

¹ <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2018/12dec/20181204-EO-70-RRD.pdf>

² <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/02/15/1893931/philippines-moves-delist-over-600-cases-disappearances>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1660026124295941>

Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator of the European Council⁴. In the said meetings, government officials referred to Ibon, Karapatan and the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines as front organizations of the CPP. They called on the EU and other member states to stop the release of funds to these groups.

In an article in the Philippine News Agency (PNA), Parlade was quoted to have said: “Many of this money was channeled by these NGOs to other organizations whose only objective is to portray President (Rodrigo) Duterte as a tyrant and his administration as oppressive.” He said, “What we wanted the EU and UN (United Nations) to also know is that the CPP and its front organizations, like Karapatan, are consistent and persistent in providing UN and European governments with all these false data.”⁵

The NTF also met with Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the said meeting, Parlade again claimed that a portion of the funds provided by the Belgian government to CPP front organizations finances the group. Gunnar Weigand, Managing Director of European External Action Service and European Commission South East Division of Development and Cooperation, said that they will monitor donors from the country and help with the audit of these funds. In a news report, Alex Paul Monteagudo, Director General of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, further alleged that “these front organizations have mastered the art of sourcing and diverting funds to buy weapons and train children to become warriors in their alleged schools.”⁶

Under Proclamation No. 374, signed in December 2017, under Section 3 and 15 of the Republic Act 10168 or the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act of 2012, President Duterte designated the CPP-NPA and all other designated persons/organizations as terrorist organizations. Also under this proclamation, authorities may freeze and forfeit property and funds of members of front organizations of CPP-NPA and those that may be funding or providing financial assistance to these organizations. The circumstance may lead to warrantless arrests of said persons.

On February 21, 2019, the Philippine government through National Security Council Deputy Director General Vicente Agdamag handed over to Ambassador Evan P. Garcia, Philippine Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN) and other International Organizations in Geneva, documents of alleged complaints of several indigenous people's groups, represented by Mindanao Indigenous Peoples Council for Peace and Development, against the Communist Party of the Philippines-New Peoples' Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF).

They again cited IBON Foundation, Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, Mindanao Interfaith Service Foundation, Incorporated, and KARAPATAN as alleged front organizations of the CPP-NPA-NDF in their complaints.⁷ The Philippine government delegation said these organizations are the source of accounts of human rights violations in the Philippines, which they called false narratives.⁸

The Philippine delegation also maligned United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz in their so-called letter-complaint to the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. To wit, as the delegation's letter was quoted in a news report: “*It must be noted that the current UN Rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpuz seems to have never lifted a finger to intervene in these communist terrorist groups' (CTGs) violations and has rather trained her attention to government*

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=385342718688790>

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http://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1063645?fbclid=IwAR3J4Z2mBN9Eh27mSDPGHQZVENQj6WhqUFvIjImb68NuJNOD_g8ozvoi8vI

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http://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1063645?fbclid=IwAR3J4Z2mBN9Eh27mSDPGHQZVENQj6WhqUFvIjImb68NuJNOD_g8ozvoi8vI

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=386041231947311>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=426222728121562>

forces who have been trying to defend the human rights of the IPs.”⁹

In an opinion post, Tauli-Corpuz said she has not received any communications regarding the NPA. “We also address non-state actors, such as corporations and non-state armed groups when we receive communications about them and if we have addresses,” she added. The UN expert also said that “the main actors we monitor are States. The duty-bearers of human rights are States. Thus, the main mandate of Special Rapporteurs is to monitor the duty bearers. So far, I received no communications regarding the NPA.”¹⁰

Tauli-Corpuz was included in the proscription filed by Department of Justice in February 2018 at a Manila Regional Trial Court declaring CPP-NPA as a terrorist organization. On January 2019, the Manila RTC Branch 19 trimmed down the list to eight, excluding more than 600 names including that of Tauli-Corpuz.

On February 22, 2019, the Philippine delegation conducted a briefing at the Concordia Room at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. According to government reports, representatives of at least 20 countries including Italy, Pakistan, Egypt, Thailand, Brazil, France, US, Croatia, Canada, Uruguay, Mexico, Switzerland, Nigeria were briefed by Senior Supt. Omega Jireh Fidel of the Philippine National Police (PNP) Directorate for Investigation and Detective Management; Brig. Gen. Antonio Parlade, Jr, assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of the Armed Forces of the Philippines; and Undersecretary Joel M. Sy Egco, Executive Director of the Presidential Task Force on Media Security.¹¹ The panelists and Garcia pressed that correct information on human rights in the Philippines could only come from the government itself and persuaded senior officials of UN representatives that the Philippine government has a legal framework and mechanisms to address human rights violations.¹²

In time with the UN trip, Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) officials also went on a tour around Brussels and Geneva in a "Press Freedom Caravan" to defend President Duterte's stand on issues such as the cases of enforced disappearances and counterinsurgency programs.

In a statement released on February 19, 2019, Karapatan said *“Our attention has been called regarding the conduct of military and intelligence officers who make rounds in diplomatic missions to red-tag specific organizations and dissuade them from providing resources that go into the campaigns and initiatives of said groups. This situation puts into peril the many efforts of human rights defenders and various organizations to provide services for the many that are marginalized and neglected by past and present governments. Years of hard work and concrete actions to respond to these specific needs are being maligned and in danger of being overturned. Their operation is gradual and surreptitious, but altogether perilous to the movement, capacity, and spaces being maximized by civil society.”*¹³

“Victims are instead branded as terrorists and mechanism to safeguard people's rights pushed forward mainly by the efforts of civil society are being co-opted and twisted in this government's desperate PR stunt,” they further averred.¹⁴

⁹ <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/02/22/cpp-npa-atrocities-against-indigenous-peoples-reach-un/>

¹⁰ <https://news.abs-cbn.com/blogs/opinions/02/25/19/opinion-govt-geneva-stunt-a-ploy-to-justify-increased-attacks-on-rights-advocates>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=404587716957156>

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=424975688045209>

¹³

<https://www.karapatan.org/PCOO+officials%E2%80%99+trip+in+Europe+on+tax+payer%E2%80%99s+money%2C+a+junket+to+salvage+PH+govt%E2%80%99s+notorious+HR+record>

¹⁴ <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/02/19/1895005/pcoo-officials-europe-trip-desperate-pr-stunt-rights-group#OxMRswa0DBpKjBrT.99>

In a statement released on February 24, 2019, Karapatan said that through “a national task force composed of militarists and mercenary hacks, it is promoting a most unbelievable lie - that government is correct and everyone else is wrong. What is however apparent is its elaborate effort to hide the injustices apparent in the country.”

Karapatan further said¹⁵:

“Together with other human rights and civil society organizations, and even international human rights experts and UN officials, we have been repeatedly maligned in the government’s vicious terrorist-labelling campaign and have faced reprisals due to our work exposing State-perpetrated human rights violations and demanding for justice and accountability. We highly urge government to stop whining and acting like the government is the aggrieved party, and start addressing these issues. We remind the Duterte government that the State is the primary duty-bearer in the promotion, protection and advancement of human rights. We are certain you might have already forgotten.”

“Efforts to falsely accuse groups and journalists raising these issues will not erase the atrocious crimes already committed and are continuously being committed by State security forces. However, these forms of terrorist-labelling and red-tagging have also resulted in the killings of human rights defenders, criminalization of their work and beliefs and illegal detention, torture and other violations of the people’s right to uphold and defend rights, to form organizations and to conduct human rights work.”

In our April 1, 2019 statement, Karapatan expressed openness to the impartial and participative audit of the European Union, including the Belgian government¹⁶. To wit:

“We, as rights-holders and human rights defenders, are receptive to such queries, in the spirit of meaningful dialogue, transparency and accountability. We are confident with what we are, and we are ready to face any question on our work, that is in accordance to international and local human rights standards.”

“Our human rights workers, all doing voluntary work, toil through day and night, even at great risk to their lives and security, to assist victims of rights violations and their families, including victims of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arrests, torture, forced evacuation, among others. We are not terrorists. We do not support terrorist activities through our projects and work -- all of which are well-documented, accounted for and independently audited.”

Also in a statement, the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines said *“We condemn in the highest terms this slander of our organization. We reiterate that our commitment to serve the rural poor drives us to provide programs for them including literacy and numeracy for Lumad children, livelihood programs, relief and rehabilitation, training and education for rural communities. This is definitely alarming as it can be used as justification to go after rural missionaries, priests, sisters and lay workers, and so we urge our fellow Christians to condemn these preposterous accusations and echo the call to end the attack against rural poor and peace advocates.”*¹⁷

Karapatan and RMP have filed complaints before the Commission on Human Rights regarding the said attacks and vilification by State forces. Unfortunately, the AFP and Parlade have continued their smear campaign against Karapatan and many other

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<https://www.karapatan.org/Duterte+govt%E2%80%99s+black+propaganda+junket+in+Europe%2C+UN+shows+its+desperation+to+bury+injustices>

¹⁶

<https://www.karapatan.org/Karapatan+welcomes+any+query+regarding+the+malicious+innuendos+of+the+PH+gov%E2%80%99t+>

¹⁷ https://opinion.inquirer.net/119914/desperate-move-to-vilify-rural-missionaries?utm_expid=.XqNwTug2W6nwDVUSgFJXed.1

human rights defenders.

We urgently appeal for your support and solidarity by:

1. Writing letters calling on the Philippine government to:
 - a. Stop its vilification and smear campaigns, through red-tagging and terrorist-labelling, against human rights defenders, their organizations and communities;
 - b. Recall Executive Order No. 70, creating a national task force (NTF) to end local communist armed conflict and institutionalizing the so-called whole of nation approach and stop all activities emanating from this order, including the smear campaigns against human rights activists;
 - c. Withdraw its counterinsurgency program Oplan Kapayapaan, which victimizes innocent and unarmed civilians, and criminalizes the work of human rights defenders;
 - d. Prioritize the enactment and full implementation of a Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill that will give legal recognition and safeguard rights defenders in the conduct of their work, in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders; and
 - e. Adhere to and respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and all major Human Rights instruments that it is a party and signatory.
2. Issuing statements of solidarity for circulation to the public and media circles. Publish these on your websites, social media platforms among others. Please send a copy to karapatan@karapatan.org.
3. Reporting malicious posts vilifying our organization on social media and flagging said posts, users, and pages as false news or hate speech.
4. Conducting or joining mass actions and campaigns to support rights defenders under attack.
5. Informing and lobbying with officials of government and inter-governmental bodies in other countries on the attacks on human rights defenders in the Philippines and on the initiatives to independent investigations on the human rights situation in the Philippines.

You may send your communications to:

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JP Laurel St., San Miguel,

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Voice: (+632) 564 1451 to 80

Fax: (+632) 742-1641 / 929-3968

E-mail: op@president.gov.ph or send a message through <http://op-proper.gov.ph/contact-us/>

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Please send us a copy of your email/mail/fax to the above-named officials, to our address below:

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