

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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PHILIPPINES: END USE OF ANTI-TERROR LAWS TO TARGET DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS WORKERS

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the increasing misuse of counter-terrorism laws by the Philippine government to crack down on development, humanitarian and human rights organizations. This crackdown has resulted in severe restrictions to these organization's legitimate operations mainly by freezing their assets, while development workers and activists are subjected to harassment and intimidation, including punitive prosecution and even detention. Amnesty International calls on the administration of President Bongbong Marcos Jr to put an end to the targeting of humanitarian groups, development workers and human rights activists with problematic laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 and the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act of 2012. Instead of vilifying and obstructing the work of these groups, the government must create an enabling environment for them to be able to carry out their activities – often the communities' only source of relief in the absence of government support – without fear of reprisal. This includes amending or repealing these two counter-terrorism measures to ensure that they are not weaponized against groups whose advocacy and activities – mainly to deliver aid to communities where the government fails or is unable to do so – are often perceived as criticism against government neglect. The government must also end the deadly practice of red-tagging; as a first step, it should dismantle the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict that has been leading and perpetrating this practice.

A recent string of government-initiated arrest warrants targeted Paghidaet sa Kauswagan Development Group (PDG), based in Kabankalan City, Negros Occidental, that has been advocating for sustainable agriculture, environmental protection and respect for the rights of farmers and fishers for over 30 years. On 2 January, authorities arrested two current staff members of PDG – Perla Pavillar and Federico Salvilla – over several charges of alleged terrorism-related financing filed against them by the Department of Justice (DOJ). The charges were based on the testimony of a sole witness from 2014 and 2018 who claimed to be a former member of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed group, the New People's Army (NPA), both of which were designated as "terrorist organizations" by the Philippines' Anti-Terrorism Council in 2020. The witness alleged that PDG served as the CPP's political organizer, providing the CPP with money and firearms as well as tending to its sick and wounded members, all of which PDG has denied. Pavillar and Salvilla remain detained under bail totaling PhP 1 million (USD 17,000). Two others also connected with PDG also have arrest warrants against them over the same charges. One of them is their former executive director Clarisa Ramos, the wife of PDG's co-founder and human rights lawyer [Benjamin Ramos](#) who was shot dead in November 2018. There has been no accountability for his killing. Dharyll Albañez, who was wrongfully identified in the charges as a staff member of PDG, was also ordered arrested over the same charges; he surrendered and posted bail amounting to PhP 400,000 (USD 6,800).

In interviews, PDG told Amnesty International that they have been the subject of relentless red-tagging – the public vilification of human rights defenders and other targeted groups and individuals as alleged members and clandestine recruiters of the NPA – and other forms of intimidation under several administrations. The attacks, however, worsened under the administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte and continued under now President Marcos Jr. In 2018, posters bearing the names and faces of the Ramos couple and other human rights activists were put up in Negros Occidental accusing them of being affiliated with the NPA. Months later, Benjamin Ramos was gunned down; two other people tagged in the posters have also been killed in still unresolved circumstances. Prior to their arrest, Pavillar and Salvilla had been subjected to repeated accusations of being NPA members from as early as 2020, as well as targeted by the military through surveillance particularly during community meetings they organized. To date, PDG said their staff members continue to be the subject of death threats, surveillance and visits by alleged military personnel.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that PDG is being targeted for what appears prima facie to be legitimate development work. The charges against PDG appear to fit into an increasingly alarming pattern of using the twin laws of anti-terror and terror financing against development and humanitarian organizations. This pattern often begins with these groups being red-tagged, followed by trumped-up charges of committing acts of terrorism or of financing alleged terrorist organizations, at times just based on the account of a single individual dating from years back as is the case in the current

charges against PDG. This often results not only in the prosecution and detention of accused individuals, but also in the freezing of their assets, the closure of their bank accounts and the onerous task of raising funds to allow them to post bail for their temporary freedom, all leading to a heavy strain on the operations of these organizations.

Also in January 2025, five activists from northern Philippines, including a journalist, were charged with terror financing. In May 2024, the Anti-Money Laundering Council froze the bank accounts of the Leyte Center for Development for allegedly financing “terrorist” organizations, including the NPA; in January 2025, a court dismissed the charge against its executive director, Jazmin Jerusalem, for insufficient evidence. Trials are scheduled to commence in February 2025 against 27 development workers linked to the Community Empowerment Resource Network, a consortium of humanitarian organizations, who were charged by the DOJ with terrorism financing in May 2024; each charge carried a bail of PhP 200,000 (USD 3,477). Other organizations, such as the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines and the Amihan Federation of Women Peasants, are facing similar charges.

The targeted organizations often carry the same profile – they are groups and individuals that are often well-known in their respective communities, involved in decades of humanitarian work for which they are recognized by award-giving institutions or even tapped as partners in community projects led by local governments. In the context of the Philippines that is often struck by strong typhoons and where basic services struggle to reach the most remote communities owing to poverty and corruption, development and humanitarian organizations fill in the gaps in government support by providing much-needed aid to impacted and often forgotten communities.

Amnesty International calls on the government of the Philippines to put an end to the weaponization of counter-terrorism laws to target humanitarian, development and human rights workers and impede the important work of their organizations. The government must initiate a review of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 and the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act of 2012, with a view to amending or repealing them and ensuring that these and other similar laws in effect or yet to be passed are not unduly wielded to obstruct and penalize legitimate development or aid work. Pending this, and in the absence of evidence admissible in court, Amnesty International urges the government to drop terrorism-related charges against humanitarian, development and human rights workers, and work towards creating an enabling environment for them to carry out their activities and advocacy. The government must also put an end to the deadly practice of red-tagging, including by dismantling the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict that has been leading and perpetrating this practice particularly in rural communities.