

Back to Philippines

Philippines 2022

Unlawful killings under the “war on drugs” continued and impunity for thousands of past killings remained entrenched. Repression of dissent intensified and freedom of expression was further restricted as human rights defenders, political activists, journalists and others were subjected to unlawful killings, arbitrary arrest and detention. Authorities blocked the websites and ordered the closure of independent media.

Background

In May elections, the son of former President Marcos, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., was elected president and Sara Duterte-Carpio, daughter of former President Duterte, vice president. The “war on drugs”, initiated in 2016 and associated with grave human rights violations, continued. In October, over 150 people died in floods and landslides triggered by a severe tropical storm.

Extrajudicial killings and impunity

The number of killings committed in the context of the “war on drugs” rose after the new administration took office. According to the university-based research group Dahas, 324 drug-related killings by the police and other unknown assailants were recorded during 2022, 175 of which took place after July.

In September, the Department of Justice announced it was filing murder charges against at least 30 police officers involved in raids in Calabarzon region in 2021 targeting activists in which nine people were killed. In August, the Department announced it would review 250 cases involving killings in Central Luzon during anti-drug operations. However, the vast majority of killings related to the “war on drugs” remained uninvestigated.

In June, the ICC Prosecutor filed an application with the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber to resume investigations into crimes against humanity, including in the context of the “war on drugs”. The Prosecutor stated that investigations by national authorities were inadequate and that the suspension of ICC investigations in late 2021 at the request of the Philippine government was therefore unwarranted.¹ The government maintained its position of non-cooperation with the ICC.²

In October, the UN Human Rights Council failed to renew OHCHR’s mandate to monitor and report on the human rights situation and progress towards accountability in the Philippines, despite a recommendation by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that it should do so.³ The joint UN human rights capacity-building and technical assistance programme continued but was criticized for lack of progress in key areas.

In November, activists Ericson Acosta and Joseph Jimenez were killed after they were reportedly captured by government security forces. The killings took place amid increasing armed clashes between the military and the armed opposition group, the New People’s Army, in Negros Occidental province.⁴

Repression of dissent

The continued linking of organizations and individuals to communist groups by the authorities and their supporters, known as “red-tagging”, led to further killings, arbitrary detentions and harassment of human rights defenders, political activists and others.

On 15 January, unknown assailants shot dead Silvestre Fortades and Rose Maria Galias, both members of a “red-tagged” farmers’ and labour rights organization, in Sorsogon province.

On 18 February, police arrested Natividad Castro, a “red-tagged” doctor who provided medical care for Indigenous communities in Mindanao. In March, the Bayugan City Region Trial Court dismissed charges of kidnapping and illegal detention against her, but reversed the decision in June. The court-ordered warrant to re-arrest Natividad Castro had not been acted on at year end.

In August, police arrested Adora Faye de Vera, a “red-tagged” human rights defender in Metro Manila. She was previously arbitrarily detained during the martial law period in the 1970s under former President Marcos and continued to campaign for justice for other martial law victims. Adora Faye de Vera remained in police detention at year end, accused of murder and rebellion in relation to an alleged ambush in 2009 in which members of the security forces were killed.⁵

The “red-tagging” in September of a judge, Marlo Magdoza-Malagar, by a former spokesperson of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict drew strong criticism from the Supreme Court. The “red-tagging” was connected with the judge’s dismissal of a Department of Justice petition seeking to designate the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army, as terrorist groups.

Prisoner of conscience and former Senator Leila de Lima spent her sixth year in detention over politically motivated drug-related charges, despite the retraction of testimonies by key witnesses.⁶ In August, the Office of the Ombudsman dismissed a separate bribery case against her.

Freedom of expression

Physical attacks and judicial harassment of journalists intensified and independent news sites were blocked.

At least two journalists were killed in 2022, including prominent radio broadcaster Percival Mabasa (known as Percy Lapid) who was shot on 3 October in Las Piñas City, Metro Manila.⁷ A man allegedly involved in the killing was murdered in prison shortly afterwards. The head of the Bureau of Corrections, who Percy Lapid had criticized on air for corruption, was subsequently named as a suspect in investigations which remained ongoing at year end.

In June, the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) ordered internet service providers to block access to 28 websites, including those belonging to independent media groups accused by the government of affiliation with or supporting “terrorists and terrorist organizations”. In response to a legal challenge by news outlet Bulatlat, the NTC was ordered to lift the order to block its website. In October, Bulatlat managing editor Ronalyn Olea was “red-tagged” by a news anchor on a pro-government TV network who accused her on air of being an internet operator for communist organizations.

In July, the Court of Appeals upheld the conviction for cyber libel against Nobel laureate Maria Ressa and Reynaldo Santos Jr. A second appeal was rejected in October. The case against the two, respectively the founder and a former researcher with the independent media outlet Rappler, was connected with a 2012 article alleging links between a businessman and drugs/human trafficking. They faced over six years in prison if their final appeal to the Supreme Court is unsuccessful.⁸ At least seven other cases against Maria Ressa remained pending at year end. An order to close Rappler remained under appeal.

In August, activist and former vice-presidential candidate, Walden Bello, was arrested on charges of cyber libel filed by the former public information officer for Vice President Sara Duterte. A motion by Walden Bello to dismiss the charges, which related to comments linking the officer to drugs but which were widely regarded as aimed at silencing an opposition voice, was pending at year end.

Indigenous peoples' rights

In April, security guards for a private plantation firm fired shots injuring at least five people during a visit by a presidential candidate to meet with leaders of the Manobo-Pulangiyon community in Bukidnon province.

In September, the community called on the government to investigate the shooting, legally recognize their ancestral land claims and put an end to land encroachment by private companies that has displaced the community.⁹

Failure to tackle climate crisis

President Marcos Jr. committed to tackle climate change on taking office. However, budget cuts, including to the national Climate Change Commission, and a push towards the use of nuclear and fossil fuels raised concerns among environmental groups about whether adaptation plans and commitments to increase the use of renewable energy sources would be met.
