



SANGGUNIANG PAMBANSA NG MGA SIMBAHAN SA PILIPINAS

National Council of Churches in the Philippines

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Member Churches

- Apostolic Catholic Church
- Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches
- Episcopal Church in the Philippines
- Iglesia Evangelica Metodista. En Las Islas Filipinas
- Iglesia Filipina Independiente
- Iglesia Unida Ekyumenikal
- Lutheran Church in the Philippines
- The Salvation Army
- The United Methodist Church
- United Church of Christ in the Philippines

Associate Members

- Association of Christian Schools, Colleges and Universities
- Consortium of Christian Organizations for Rurban Development
- Ecumenical Church Foundation, Inc.
- Kaisahang Buhay Foundation
- Lingap Pangkabataan, Inc.
- Manila Community Services, Inc.
- Philippine Bible Society
- Student Christian Movement of the Philippines
- Union Church of Manila

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Human Rights Violations Against Churches and Church People Under the Duterte Administration

Founded in 1963, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) is an ecumenical fellowship of 10 Protestant and non-Roman Catholic churches and nine service-oriented organizations¹. It is working in solidarity with other civil society organizations in the Philippines in the struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

The NCCP strives for a just, egalitarian, self-reliant, and sustainable society through work in pursuit of human rights, peace, and justice; in the provision of humanitarian relief and resources for disaster preparedness; and in education and advocacy concerning HIV-awareness, sexuality, women and children, urban and rural poor, and indigenous peoples.

The Council's long-standing and intimate work in these areas has made it a witness of numerous acts of injustice. Prevalent human rights violations are caused by, and further perpetuate, deep rooted systems of injustice. Under the presidency of Mr. Duterte, these violations have grown yet more common and blatant without recourse. While the NCCP often serves the communities targeted by these atrocities, the Council has an even more intimate knowledge of their impact. Because the NCCP and its member churches are compelled by faith to pursue justice and human dignity, their most active members have themselves faced harassment and even murder.

The NCCP is directly engaged in efforts to amplify the voices of the indigenous peoples and the farmers in their call to protect their land and restore their environments; the voice of the urban poor to speak out against the extrajudicial killings of the "War on Drugs" and demand respect for the life and rights of those in poverty which it targets; and to call attention to the plight of all those who are marginalized by society.

For this reason, some individuals under the Council have been falsely accused of association with the rebel New People's Army (NPA), unjustly detained and incarcerated, and murdered while authorities offered only feigned attempts to pursue justice. In this process, not only are lives lost and communities torn apart, but the government instills fear in those who would dare to be led by their faith to stand up for the rights of humanity.

¹ For more information about the NCCP, please visit: www.nccphilippines.org

Most of the killings of human rights defenders in various parts of the country follow a pattern wherein they are publicly vilified first through posters and streamers accusing them as members or sympathizers of the NPA. Some of the cases contained in this submission follow that pattern.

While this report touches on the human rights violations against NCCP members², it also includes violations against church people from other religious groups including the Roman Catholic Church. The following illustrative incidents show a pattern of attacks against church people. Even foreign missionaries were not spared. The prevailing pattern is that those who are involved in ministries for the poor and marginalized are the ones being targeted for vilification, threats, harassments and even extrajudicial killing by suspected State agents.

Threat, Harassment and Intimidation

Bishop Modesto Villasanta, Bishop Emeritus of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), has been harassed by the military on various instances for his ministry and advocacy for the Lumad (collective term for indigenous people of the island of Mindanao). In November 2017, Bp. Villasanta along with Fr. Raymond Ambray and other members of the Friends of the Lumad in Caraga were subjected to threat, harassment, and intimidation by Col. Andres Centino, Brigade Commander of the 401st Brigade of the Philippine Army during a meeting of the Municipal Peace and Order Council (MPOC) of the Municipality of Llanga, Surigao del Sur. The meeting was about the forced mass evacuation of 345 families after intense military operations. In the meeting, Col. Centino accused Bishop Villasanta of forcing the Lumad to evacuate.

Mr. Aldeem Yanez, a church worker of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente -Visayas-Mindanao Regional Office for Development, volunteer of the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP) and former NCCP Vice Chairperson, was also harassed. In February 2019, agents from the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency and Military Intelligence Brigade visited his home and asked for his personal information. He was monitored for a week by two suspicious persons on motorcycles.

Other human rights violations among our member churches include the harassment in June 2019 by combined forces of the PNP Regional Mobile Group and Philippine Army who barged and searched the United Methodist Church (UMC) in a village in Roxas, Oriental Mindoro. They interrogated Rev. Glofie Baluntong, District Superintendent of UMC Oriental Mindoro-Romblon-Marinduque and Rev. Wilfredo Yasay pastor of Good News UMC in Roxas for letting in a fact-finding team from the human rights group Karapatan that sought refuge in the church of Rev. Yasay.

Harassment of Foreign Missionaries

Sr. Patricia “Pat” Fox, NDS, a missionary of the international Roman Catholic congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion, was picked up by intelligence officers of the Bureau of Immigration in April 2018 supposedly to verify her papers. She was detained overnight and was released the next day. Sr. Pat was singled out for deportation for her alleged “political activities.” President Duterte later said that he ordered the Bureau to investigate her for “disorderly conduct.” The Bureau tagged Sr. Pat as an undesirable alien and revoked her missionary visa in November 2018. The 71-year-old Australian nun is known within ecumenical circles for her missionary and social justice work in the

² The 10 member churches of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines include: Apostolic Catholic Church (ACC), Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC), Episcopal Church in the Philippines (ECP), Iglesia Evangelica Metodista en las Islas Filipinas (IEMELIF), Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI), Iglesia Unida Ekyumenikal (IUE), Lutheran Church in the Philippines (LCP), The Salvation Army (TSA), United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), and United Methodist Church (UMC).

Philippines for nearly three decades. She is an indefatigable advocate of the rights of peasants, indigenous peoples and the urban poor.

Aside from Sr. Pat, three Global Mission Fellows of the United Methodist Church (UMC)- Miracle Osman, Adam Shaw and Tawanda Chandiwana - were also subjected to harassment by the Bureau of Immigration for their missionary work. The young missionaries were assigned in Mindanao as interns of the Initiatives for Peace in Mindanao (InPeace Mindanao). They experienced difficulties in obtaining the necessary documents in order for them to leave the country. The missionaries were reportedly on a “watch list” after participating in an international ecumenical fact-finding investigation of alleged human rights violations in Mindanao around General Santos City.

Tawanda was detained under the custody of the Bureau in Davao City in May 2018 and was transferred to its main detention center in June. He was charged with overstaying his missionary visa, although he was in the process of applying for a tourist visa for the remaining period of his 20-month mission service. Miracle’s passport was confiscated while in the process of renewing her missionary visa, while Adam had been unable to obtain an exit clearance certificate. Through a national and international campaign led by the UMC, they were able to leave the country in July 2018 but they were blacklisted by the Bureau.

Vilification of Churches and church people

In September 2018, the parish priest of IFI in Tigbao, Zamboanga del Sur, Rev. Felix Espra Jr. reported a painted marking on their chapel that states, “IFI=NPA” (Iglesia Filipina Independiente = New People’s Army). There were other sets of markings found along the highway that says, “UCCP=NPA” (United Church of Christ in the Philippines = NPA), “IFI=NPA” “RMP = NPA” (Rural Missionaries of the Philippines = NPA) and “Bishop Ablon=NPA”, branding them as 'SALOT' (menace). The Rt. Rev. Antonio Ablon, IFI Bishop of the Diocese of Pagadian, was singled out in this red-tagging. Military personnel are suspected to be behind the spray painted graffiti. Military presence was noted in areas near these postings. This is an apparent effort by the military to attack the prophetic and social ministry of the Church, as well as threaten its leaders.

These markings appeared after these church groups led a solidarity and mercy mission in June 2018 in a militarized Subanen (lumad) community in Zamboanga del Sur. They verified reports of aerial bombings and other human rights abuses by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This red-tagging of churches and individuals by accusing them as being the same as the New People's Army (NPA) is an explicit and dire threat. This act renders bishops, priests, pastors and lay workers as targets of possible physical attack and other harassments by the military and other State security forces. It also casts aspersions on the ministry of these churches and violates their right to free exercise of religion and expression.

The Rt. Rev. Felixberto Calang of the Diocese of Cagayan de Oro of the IFI, is the chairperson of Initiatives for Peace in Mindanao (InPeace), spokesperson of Sowing the Seeds of Peace in Mindanao and a core group member of the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP). Bp. Calang, together with Bp. Ablon, were among the names listed as “terrorist members of the New People’s Army and Communist Party of the Philippines” in two sets of flyers that were anonymously distributed in February 2019 in Cagayan de Oro City. The IFI bishops, together with Fr. Christopher Ablon, IFI National Coordinator, Fr. Rolando Abejo of Movement Against Tyranny, and Fr. Allen Khen Apus, spokesperson of Karapatan Northern Mindanao, were among those maliciously tagged in the said list. Also included were other activists, lawyers, and journalists, who are also known for their commitment in championing human rights.

Since then, streamers and posters are displayed almost on a weekly basis, linking Bp. Calang, Bp. Ablon and Fr. Abejo as well as other rights groups including the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines (RMP) with the CPP and the NPA.

On November 5 this year, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines was included on the list of “front organizations of local communist terrorist groups” by the Department of National Defense (DND). The NCCP was one among a number of humanitarian and civil society organizations in the list that was presented by Major General Reuben Basiao, Armed Forces of the Philippines Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence during a committee meeting at the House of Representatives for the modernization of the armed forces. The presentation of Major General Basiao was in the context of the insurgency of the Communist Party of the Philippines -New People’s Army-National Democratic Front (CCP-NPA-NDF), its history, organizational flowchart and number of attacks nationwide. The front organizations were allegedly providing funds to the “Communist Terrorist Group” (CTG) through “International Solidarity Work”. The NCCP decried its inclusion in the list. Such lists pose a clear threat to the NCCP staff members and their families.

Filing of trumped-up cases, unlawful arrests

The Rt. Rev. Carlo Morales, Diocesan Bishop of Ozamis of the IFI, was arrested in May 2017 for illegal possession of explosives. He was arrested with Mr. Rommel Salinas, a peace consultant of the underground National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). The evidence against them were clearly fabricated. Bishop Carlo is a known peace advocate especially in Mindanao. He is also a strong advocate for the defense of indigenous communities against large-scale mining and other projects. After almost a year in jail, Bp. Morales was released on bail for a usually non-bailable offense due to the failure of the prosecution to present a strong case.

In July 2018 a notice to submit a counter-affidavit was issued by the Provincial Prosecutor in Lianga, Surigao del Sur for 30 persons most of whom were leaders of the Malahutayong Pakigbisog Alang sa Sumusunod (MAPASU), a Lumad organization. Included in the subpoena was Pastor Marxiel Torralba, a pastor of the UCCP and member of the Friends of the Lumad in Caraga. Torralba was implicated in the complaints as a leader of MAPASU for allegedly forcing the Lumad to evacuate. The evacuation happened after the military occupied their communities for several days and who began building a military detachment in their community despite opposition by residents.

There was also the unlawful arrest in June 2019 of seven civilians who are mostly members of the UCCP and IFI in the remote area of Buenavista Himamaylan, Negros. Included was Pastor Jimmy Teves, UCCP Lincientiate Pastor who together with a co-pastor has been serving 17 UCCP local churches. Aside from them there were other arrests made by the local police. According to verified reports from the UCCP Office of the Bishop of West Visayas Jurisdiction, the seven were arrested on charges of murder and frustrated murder which are obviously trumped up. They were arrested without the benefit of a genuine preliminary investigation which is required by law.

The UCCP and the IFI strongly refute the claims of the military that they are members of the NPA. They are subsistence farmers who are trying to eke out of their dire economic situation by practicing Christian diakonia and biblical forms of sharing of farm produce. Most of them are active members of UCCP, IFI and Roman Catholic churches.

The UCCP and NCCP believe that these operations are part of the ongoing “Operation Sauron,” which is practically the undeclared martial law in Negros, Samar and Bicol regions and which

operationalizes the President's Memorandum Order 32 that militarized these places "to suppress lawless violence and acts of terror." This legitimizes the targeting of farmers and rural communities that resist onerous usury in land rental and displacement of rural communities to give way to large scale agri-business and mining operations. Farmers are subjected to harassment by government security forces because of their diaconal food production and their stand for justice, peace and human rights.

In September 2018, Rachel Mariano, a wife of UCCP Pastor Bill Mariano, handed over herself to the court to prove her innocence of the charges levelled against her. Rachel was charged with different counts of murder related to an encounter between the AFP and NPA in Quirino, Ilocos Sur in October 2017. The trumped-up charges were filed by the 81st Infantry Battalion of the 7th Infantry Division of the AFP based in Ilocos Sur. Since the fabricated charges were non-bailable, she was incarcerated in the provincial jail for close to a year and was only freed a year after.

Mariano is a development worker and an advocate of public health as a basic human right. She works as the Health Program Coordinator at the Centre for Development Programs in the Cordillera region up north, an organization which works in partnership with the Cordillera People's Alliance (CPA) in empowering and advocating for the rights of the indigenous people. As an Ibaloi (an indigenous tribe), she worked also to defend the rights of the indigenous people.

Recently on December 6, 2019, a warrant of arrest was issued against Sr. Elenita "Ellen" Belardo, 80 years old, the former National Coordinator of the RMP. The arrest warrant has been issued stemming from a perjury case filed by National Security Adviser and former AFP chief, Hermogenes Esperon, Jr., against Karapatan, Gabriela, and RMP, accusing them of lying about their legal status. The three organizations filed writs of amparo and habeas data before the Supreme Court to seek protection from red-tagging and vilification done by high-ranking military officials. While the cases against members of the other two organizations were rightfully dropped, the erroneous charges against Sr. Belardo's was pursued. She filed later for bail. Sr. Ellen is known for her ministries with the poor in the rural areas and is active in championing the rights of poor peasants and farmers.

Extrajudicial Killings

Wilmer Agorde, age 64, was shot and stabbed dead by an unknown assailant in front of his grandchildren, ages eight and nine in February 2017 in a village in President Roxas, North Cotabato. Agorde was an executive committee member of the Promotion of Church People's Response in North Cotabato and the auditor of Mailuminado Farmers Association Incorporated, which is an affiliate of the peasant group Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas. He had been at the forefront of campaigns in the fight for ownership of unused agricultural land-reservation. He was also at the forefront of protests against the encampment of the military in their community in the guise of Peace and Development Outreach Programs.

On September 2017, Erning Aykid and Aylan Lantoy, village councilors were shot dead in Bulalacao, Oriental Mindoro. They were killed by two unidentified, masked assailants riding a motorcycle. In the past, they had been questioned by the military about their affiliation with the IFI and the NPA. There was a detachment of the 4th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army about 150 meters away from where the incident occurred. Mr. Aykid was an IFI lay minister who worked with the indigenous Mangyan communities. He was also an active member of the Haggibat Coalition, an organization of Mangyan tribes. Mr. Aykid was an advocate for indigenous people's rights and defended the land against development aggression resulting from mining in their rivers and their ancestral lands.

Because of his conviction of protecting the ancestral domain, he was tagged as a member of the New People's Army by the military.

In November 2017, Perfecto Hoyle, a lay pastor for the UCCP, was shot by two masked men in his front yard. This incident occurred in a village in Kicharao, Agusan del Norte, where the 29th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army was encamped at the time of the shooting. Hoyle was known to be a staunch advocate of peasant rights, advancing the interests of the farmers in their area. He was a member of a peasant organization, UMAN (Peasant Union of Agusan Del Norte).

Under the Duterte administration, three Roman Catholic priests - Fr. Marcelito "Tito" Paez, Fr. Mark Ventura and Fr. Richmond Nilo - were killed in a span of six months.

Fr. Paez, 72, was a retired parish priest of the Diocese of San Jose City, Nueva Ecija. He was the Provincial Coordinator of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines in Central Luzon. In December 2017, Fr. Paez assisted in the release of political prisoner Rommel Tucay from jail. On his way home that night, Father Paez was shot repeatedly by motorcycle-riding men while driving his vehicle along the road in a village in Jaen, Nueva Ecija. Fr. Paez was brought at the hospital but died while undergoing treatment. Fr. Mark Ventura and Fr. Richmond Nilo, were both gunned down and killed in the altar, in April and June 2018 respectively.

Nephtali "Nep" Morada was an active ecumenical leader in his younger years. He was a former chairperson of the youth church group Kalipunan ng Kristiyanong Kabataan sa Pilipinas, and a senior friend of the Student Christian Movement in the Philippines. Nep was gunned down on his way to his work in June 2018 as armed men on board a truck shot him in a village in Carayan, Naga City. Prior to his murder, fabricated charges were filed against him. He was also subjected to surveillance and had experienced vilification and harassment for his advocacies on peoples' issues as a former coordinator of people's organizations BAYAN-Bicol and Bayan Muna.

UCCP Pastor Rev. Ernesto "Tata" Estrella was shot dead in August 2019 while driving his motorcycle in Antipas, North Cotabato, by still unidentified motorcycle-riding assailants.

Conclusion

Most of the church people whose rights are violated are those primarily doing the Christian mandate and mission of ministering to the poor and the marginalized. They are the ones who are doing their prophetic task as Christians to be with the people, especially in times where the basic human rights of every person and communities are undermined. Their Christian mandate compels them to be with the last of the least and with the poorest of the poor to defend God's image in all of us. Their faith compels them to accompany people in asserting and attaining their full rights, but their faith expression have also put them in danger as they are vilified, harassed and even killed.

The violations committed by the Duterte government against church people and churches go against the right to the exercise of the freedom of religion and the exercise of ministries in furtherance of religious beliefs. Such freedoms are at the core not only of the Bill of Rights of the Philippine Constitution but of various international instruments. The said guaranteed freedoms are being subverted in the context of the government's counter-insurgency program called Oplan Kapatagan

(Stability). Under the Executive Order 70 and the Whole of Nation Approach³, such blatant attacks on the people, including people of faith, has become a norm.

Despite the many violations that church people have been subjected to, there has been little to zero accountability. Those who commit rights violations face no repercussions, augmenting the climate of impunity. The Philippine judicial system remains open to manipulation, is exceedingly slow in delivering justice, and there continue be a high number of cases that are brought against human rights defenders and political activists by the military and police, that lack adequate credibility and are intended as a form of harassment. Local remedies are becoming more and more difficult for those seeking justice.

Thus, as a council of churches, we are submitting this report as part of our sacred task to defend the dignity of every person who are each a child of God and a bearer of God's image.

Recommendations

In light of the above, the NCCP requests the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Council to call on the Philippine government to:

- i. Stop human rights violations against church people and respect the freedom of religion and the exercise of ministries in furtherance of religious beliefs.
- ii. Render justice to the victims of human rights violations committed by State security forces through proper investigation and prosecution of alleged perpetrators.
- iii. Address the pervasive climate of impunity, in particular, ensure speedy and proper investigation, arrest, prosecution and conviction of perpetrators.
- iv. Rescind the government's counter-insurgency program which has caused many human rights violations against human rights defenders.
- v. Issue invitations to pertinent UN special procedures and mandate holders especially those with pending requests.

The NCCP also calls on the UN Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution for an independent fact-finding mission or a Commission on Inquiry regarding the human rights situation in the Philippines.

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³ Executive Order No. 70 Institutionalizing the Whole-of-Nation Approach in attaining inclusive and sustainable peace, creating a national task force to end local communist armed conflict, and directing the adoption of a national peace framework, 4 December 2018: <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2018/12dec/20181204-EO-70-RRD.pdf>