

May 1, 2020

Mr. Peter MacArthur Canadian Ambassador to the Philippines

Cc: Peter Lundy, Director General of the South-East Asia Division;
Mark Gawn Director, Myanmar & Philippines;
Cheryl Boon Deputy Director, Philippines

Dear Mr. MacArthur,

Re: Call for the release of prisoners, including political prisoners

The signatories to this letter, comprised of Canadian development, human rights, solidarity and ecumenical organizations, churches and trade unions, strongly support the call of Philippine partners for the release of the most vulnerable non-violent and political prisoners.

At 534 percent of their capacity in March 2020, the Philippines has the most overcrowded jails in the world. These conditions make physical distancing and isolation of infected detainees impossible.¹ The implications of this may be dire, risking the uncontrollable spread of the deadly virus, putting those detained in a highly vulnerable position to be infected. In urging governments to take immediate actions to protect the health of people in detention from Covid-19, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet,² led the call for the release of prisoners, noting the dangerous overcrowding in detention facilities in many countries and called on authorities to examine ways to release those particularly vulnerable to the virus. She warns that forgetting “those behind the bars” would have potentially catastrophic consequences. The Philippines’ Bureau of Jail and Management Penology (BJMP) have also expressed support for the grant of temporary releases to eligible prisoners as a means to decongest jails.

These conditions violate international human rights principles which both Canada and the Philippines have assented to. We call on the government of Canada, including all embassy staff and the Ambassador to work with their counterparts in the Philippines to protect the human rights of prisoners throughout the pandemic and to advocate for the release of the most vulnerable non-violent and political prisoners.

Embassy staff are also encouraged to fully implement Voices at Risk: Canada’s Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders, which includes provisions for senior level meetings between Canada’s Head of Mission and local authorities where human rights defenders are at acute risk. Such discussions with Department Secretaries and senior officials who make the

¹ Human Rights Watch, April 6, 2020: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/06/philippines-reduce-crowded-jails-stop-covid-19>

² United Nations, April 3, 2020: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061002>

decision on the release of prisoners should underscore the need to assure political detainees and their families that they will be included in such a process for humanitarian release. This is in line with the call of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stressing the inclusion of political prisoners in humanitarian releases during this period of public health emergency. The call for release of prisoners is broadly backed by a variety of sectors, including members of the Churches and academe. We support the effort of the National Union of People's Lawyers in assisting relatives of political prisoners in filing a petition with the Supreme Court seeking the release of sick and elderly prisoners based on humanitarian grounds.

Several countries have already heeded the call of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, including the Philippines' ASEAN neighbours, Indonesia and Myanmar. We urge the Philippine Government to do the same.

Sincerely,

KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

Canadian Union of Public Employees

International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines – Canada

Inter Pares

The United Church of Canada

MiningWatch Canada

Development and Peace – Caritas Canada

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Public Service Alliance of Canada