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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Human rights against churches and church people under the Duterte administration

The Commission of Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (CCIA-WCC) on behalf of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) presents this statement to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council concerning human rights violations against church organizations and church individuals in the Philippines under the administration of President Rodrigo R. Duterte.

Founded in 1963, the NCCP is a partner of the World Council of Churches and is the largest group of Protestant churches in the Philippines. Because the NCCP and its member churches are compelled by faith to pursue justice and human dignity, their most active members have faced harassment and even murder. The transgressions committed against church people and churches are violations of civil and political rights, including the right to freedom of religion and to exercise ministry in furtherance of religious beliefs.

On November 5, 2019, the NCCP was included on a list of “front organizations of local communist terrorist groups” by the Department of National Defense. The NCCP was one among a number of humanitarian and civil society organizations in the list presented by Major General Reuben Basiao, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, during a committee meeting at the House of Representatives. Basiao’s presentation was in the context of the insurgency of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army-National Democratic Front (CCP-NPA-NDF). The “front organizations” were allegedly providing funds to the “communist terrorist group” through “international solidarity work,” an accusation that has been disproven by the NCCP in the course of its decades-long ministry. The ‘red-tagging’ of NCCP was revived again after 6 months, amid the ongoing health crisis in the Philippines, on May 30, 2020. The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict in one of their Facebook posts implicated the NCCP - along with its member churches, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (IFI) and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) - as an open sectoral organization of the communist rebel group in the country. Consequently, the Anti-Terrorism Bill that is being railroaded by the House and Senate committee endangers the lives and rights of those critical of the government, including activists and human rights defenders, and church institutions that genuinely work with and for the people.

Prior to this, some NCCP member churches and their constituents have been falsely accused of association with the New People’s Army. In September 2018, Rev. Felix Espra Jr., priest of IFI-Zamboanga del Sur, reported a painted marking on their chapel saying, “IFI=NPA” (Iglesia Filipina Independiente = New People’s Army). There were other markings found along the highway: “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). IFI Bishop Antonio Ablon was singled out in this incident. Soldiers are suspected to be behind the spray painted graffiti, because of their presence in the area. This incident occurred after church groups conducted a solidarity mission in June 2018 in an indigenous community in the province, when they verified reports of aerial bombings and other human rights violations by the AFP. This ‘red-tagging’ of churches and individuals by accusing them of being the same as the NPA is an explicit and dire threat, now also taking place in Northern and Eastern Mindanao. The ‘red-tagging’ of church leaders has not only been done through markings on the wall, but also through Facebook posts.

Jeoff Larua, a youth member of the United Methodist Church (UMC) and the secretary-general of the Cordillera People’s Alliance, Tongtongan ti Umili, received death threats from five different mobile numbers. The messages falsely claim that he is a member of the CPP-NPA.

Seven civilians who are members of the UCCP and IFI were unlawfully arrested in June 2019 in the remote area in Negros. These arrests included UCCP Pastor Jimmy Teves as well as a co-pastor who had been serving 17 UCCP local churches. They were arrested on trumped-up charges of murder without due process. UCCP and IFI strongly refute the claims of the military that they are members of the NPA. They are subsistence farmers who are trying to

survive and lead their communities out of their dire economic situation by practicing Christian diakonia and biblical forms of sharing of farm produce.

Diocesan Bishop Carlo Morales of IFI-Ozamis was arrested in May 2017 on fabricated charges of illegal possession of explosives, together with Rommel Salinas, a peace consultant of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines. Bishop Morales is a well-known peace advocate defending indigenous communities against large-scale mining enterprises. After almost a year in jail, he was released on bail for a usually non-bailable offense due to failure of the prosecution to present a strong case.

Others who have been harassed by suspected state forces include:

- Bishop Modesto Villasanta, UCCP, for his ministry and advocacy for the Lumad (collective term for indigenous people of Mindanao);
- Aldeem Yanez, IFI church worker, former NCCP Vice Chairperson, whose home was visited by agents from the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency and Military Intelligence Brigade and was monitored for a week by two suspicious persons on motorcycles;
- Rev. Glofie Baluntong and Rev. Wilfredo Yasay of the UMC in Mindoro, who were interrogated by the military for letting in a fact-finding team from the human rights group Karapatan that sought refuge in their church;
- On May 1, 2020, Labor Day, Fr. Marco Sulayao, an IFI priest, who was arrested with his daughter Mace while they were on an indignation caravan over the killing of activist, Jose Reynaldo “Jory” Porquia in Iloilo.

There were also extra-judicial killings of the following church workers:

- Wilmer Agorde, member of the Promotion of Church People’s Response in North Cotabato, was stabbed and shot dead by an unknown assailant in front of his grandchildren, in February 2017. Agorde had been at the forefront of campaigns on peasants’ ownership of unused agricultural land-reservation and against the encampment of soldiers in their community.
- In September 2017, village councilors Erning Aykid and Aylan Lantoy were shot dead in Oriental Mindoro by two unidentified assailants riding a motorcycle. Aykid was an IFI lay minister who worked with the indigenous Mangyan communities.
- In November 2017, Perfecto Hoyle, UCCP lay pastor, was shot by two masked men in his front yard. This incident occurred in Agusan del Norte, where the 29th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army was encamped at the time of the shooting. Hoyle was known as a staunch advocate of the farmers’ rights in his community.
- Nephtali Morada was an active ecumenical leader in his younger years, a former chairperson of the Ecumenical Youth Movement. He was gunned down while on his way to work in June 2019 by armed men on board a truck in Naga City. Prior to his murder, fabricated charges were filed against him.
- UCCP Pastor Rev. Ernesto “Tata” Estrella was shot dead in August 2019 by unidentified motorcycle-riding assailants while driving his motorcycle in North Cotabato.

There were also violations against church people from other religious groups including the Roman Catholic Church. Even foreign missionaries were not spared.

Sr. Patricia “Pat” Fox, a missionary of the international Roman Catholic congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion was detained and deported. Sr. Pat has been known within ecumenical circles for her missionary and social justice work in the Philippines for three decades. Three Global Mission Fellows of the UMC - Miracle Osman, Adam Shaw and Tawanda Chandiwana were subjected to harassment by the Bureau of Immigration after participating in an international ecumenical fact-finding investigation of alleged human rights violations in Mindanao. Tawanda was detained for several weeks.

In December 2019, a warrant of arrest was issued against Sr. Elenita Belardo, 80 years old, the former National Coordinator of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines (RMP) who is

known for her ministries with the poor in rural areas, championing rights of the poor and peasants. The arrest warrant stemmed from a perjury case filed by National Security Adviser and former AFP chief, Hermogenes Esperon, Jr., against officers of the RMP, Karapatan, and Gabriela, accusing them of lying about RMP's legal status. Prior to these charges, officers of the organizations filed a petition for the writs of amparo and habeas data before the Supreme Court to seek protection from 'red-tagging' and vilification by high-ranking military officials. While the cases against members of the other two organizations were earlier dismissed, these cases were revived in March 2020, dragging Fr. Eduardo Ruazol of the IFI along with other activists back into legal proceedings.

Under the Duterte administration, three Roman Catholic priests - Fr. Marcelito Paez, Fr. Mark Ventura and Fr. Richmond Nilo - were killed within a span of six months. Fr. Paez, 72, was killed in December 2017 while on his way home after assisting in the release of a political prisoner from jail. Fr. Ventura and Fr. Nilo were gunned down and killed at the altar, in April and June 2018 respectively.

The latest 'red-tagging' of church people was that of a Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Raymond Montero Ambray from Mindanao. He was 'red-tagged' on Facebook for his advocacy supporting the Lumad School, saying that he is a priest who brings "evil," and "uses the word of God to manipulate and destroy the lives of the Lumad."

Rev. Joel Bengbeng of the UMC was also 'red-tagged' and was subjected to surveillance by the military. He experienced these harassments after actively participating in opposing the construction of a dam that will affect the livelihood of the communities in Ilocos Sur, in the northern part of the Philippines.

Most of the church people targetted in this way are those primarily fulfilling the Christian mandate and mission of ministering to the poor and the marginalized. They undertake their prophetic task as Christians to be with the people, especially in times when the basic human rights of people and communities are being 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 every human being. Their faith compels them to accompany people in asserting and attaining their full rights, but they are vilified, harassed and even killed for doing so.

Despite the many violations that church people have been subjected to, there has been little or no accountability. Those who have committed rights violations face no repercussions. The Philippines judicial system remains open to manipulation and has been exceedingly slow in delivering justice. There is also a high number of baseless proceedings taken by the military and police against human rights defenders and political activists, and are intended to harass them. Local remedies are becoming more and more difficult to access for those seeking justice.

Recommendations

The Commission of Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches (CCIA-WCC) makes the following appeal to the UN Human Rights Council and the Government of the Philippines:

- To put an end to human rights violations against church people and to respect freedom of religion and the exercise of ministries in furtherance of religious beliefs;
- To render justice to victims of human rights violations committed by State forces through proper investigation and prosecution of alleged perpetrators;
- To address the pervasive climate of impunity, by ensuring speedy and proper investigation, arrest, prosecution and conviction of perpetrators;
- To rescind the government's counter-insurgency program which has resulted in many human rights violations against human rights defenders; and
- To enable independent investigation by relevant UN special procedures, especially those with pending requests.

National Council of Churches of the Philippines, an NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.