

Philippines | End judicial harassment of human rights defenders

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Ten human rights defenders from three national organisations - Karapatan, Gabriela and the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines - have received notice that the Metropolitan Trial Court of Quezon City has found probable cause to charge them with perjury following a motion filed by a government official.



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'These organisations that fight for the promotion and protection of human rights, including through education, training and advocacy; that empower, educate and provide direct services to women, farmers, fisher folk, indigenous peoples and marginalised communities are being targeted for their genuine and legitimate human rights work', said ISHR's Tess McEvoy.

On 24 February 2020, a Quezon City Prosecutor granted a motion for reconsideration, finding probable cause to charge these human rights defenders with perjury. According to Philippines law, perjury is punishable by imprisonment from six months to two years and two months.

This charge stems from a petition for writ of amparo filed against various government representatives in May 2019 by these human rights defenders in relation to increasing attacks, smear campaigns and red-tagging of defenders by the Philippine military. The defenders asked the Supreme Court to grant a temporary protection order, prohibiting the government from 'threatening to commit or committing, personally or through another, any acts that violate the rights to life, liberty, and security.'

On 28 June, the Philippine Court of Appeals denied the petition for protection. However, in July 2019, a government official, who had been named in the petition filed perjury complaints against the defenders for allegedly including false information in their petition.

While an assistant Quezon City prosecutor initially dismissed the complaints against all but one human rights defender for lack of probable cause and/or sufficiency of evidence in September 2019, the government official then filed a motion for reconsideration of the dismissed complaints. On 24 February 2020, the Quezon City prosecutor sustained this motion, finding probable cause to charge the ten defenders with perjury.

This case was filed in the context of widespread and systematic violations against human rights defenders in the country. Defenders report intimidation and harassment, public criticism and stigma, arrest on trumped up charges, death threats, disappearances and killings.

Crucially, the harassment and attacks against defenders continue despite on-going national and international action on this issue:

- On 16 April 2019, [human rights organisations in the Philippines](#) called for an end to vilification and smear campaigns against human rights defenders and organisations.
- On 8 May 2019, [international organisations](#) urged the Government to respond to threats against defenders, and take measures for their protection; and urged the international community to advance accountability for violations.
- On 7 June 2019, [a group of independent UN experts](#) condemned a 'sharp deterioration in the situation of human rights across the country, including sustained attacks on people and institutions defending human rights.'
- In July 2019, the [Human Rights Council passed the first resolution](#) on the Philippines as an important first step towards justice and accountability.

Amongst all this, human rights organisations in the country continue to lobby for passage of a [law for the recognition and protection of human rights defenders](#). If passed, this would constitute a significant development for their protection.

ISHR urges the government to end the judicial harassment of these human rights defenders, who are being targeted for their legitimate human rights work. 'We call on the Government to cease attacks against defenders and call on the international community to remain supportive of defenders in conducting their legitimate work', added McEvoy.

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