



# UPDATES PHILIPPINES

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## EDITORIAL A Marcos wannabe

President Rodrigo Duterte is desperately upgrading his de facto martial law regime in the Philippines into a Marcos-type fascist dictatorship, taking advantage of the Covid-19 contagion that is now ravaging the country.

Even before the pandemic started, Duterte had already unleashed massive military forces beyond Mindanao island to Negros, Eastern Visayas and Bicol regions, and the rest of the country. He rode roughshod over local government units and created his National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) in efforts to violently quash the revolutionary armed movement and the people's democratic organizations. These have been failing miserably.

Instead, resistance to the repressive regime is increasing and the revolutionary movement is gathering strength in all parts of the country.

Duterte pounced on the Covid-19 crisis to further militarize the country, creating the Inter-Agency Task Force consisting of a cabal of former military chiefs of staff and other generals.

He used both houses of Congress to obtain emergency powers and rob public funds, getting the authority to dispose of more than PhP350 billion and realign trillions of pesos more in their 2020 government budget. These funds are hardly reaching the masses of poor people who are now suffering hunger, disease and lack of medical attention, forced to stay home by the severe lockdown. Worse, daring to go out to seek food and other necessities, people are being maltreated, illegally arrested and some even killed by Duterte's security forces.

Simultaneous to these repressive actions against the population, the regime's military minions are further intensifying their attacks in both the urban areas and in areas which they suspect as bases of the New People's Army. Also in this, they fail, miserably.

Duterte does not learn from history. It was during the Marcos dictatorship that the present revolutionary armed movement led by the Communist Party of the Philippines rose from one small group to a nationwide force. Having steeled itself through more than a half century of struggle and with the support of the downtrodden masses, the revolutionary movement will prevail. Duterte will fail, and fail miserably. **UP**



*President Duterte deploys armed forces against the virus epidemic. Photo: cpp.ph*

## Duterte threatens Martial Law, military offensives amid Covid-19 crisis

President Rodrigo Duterte spewed invectives anew on 24 April against the New People's Army and 'communists', threatening to hunt down members of 'legal fronts' and impose Martial Law, and vowed to 'finish' the NPA during the remainder of his presidential term.

Duterte made the threats during his government's press briefing on their Covid-19 pandemic response. He singled out human rights alliance Karapatan, branding it a 'communist legal front' and that members should go into hiding.

Duterte also claimed that the NPA killed two of his soldiers 'who were escorting relief goods' and that 'the NPA stole the relief goods' from his soldiers.

Responding to the accusations, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) said that "Duterte is blaming the NPA to cover up his government's inept, incompassionate and irresponsible actions in the face of the pandemic."

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The CPP said that Duterte's Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have been conducting offensive military operations even during his ceasefire order from 19 March until 15 April. Additional armed troops have been deployed to more than 400 villages and 150 towns across the country. AFP units mounted at least 24 armed offensives against NPA encampments and six aerial bombardments on rural villages. The AFP were only conducting "pretend relief work", the CPP said.

The two AFP soldiers who were killed on 21 April in Aurora province, 260 km. north of Manila, were part of an armed unit conducting combat patrols in several rural villages since 4 March. There had been no reported relief operations in the area.

CPP chief information officer Marco Valbuena said, "the AFP bring hardship, not relief, with their checkpoints, curfews and blockades. Worse, they enter the communities without protective equipment, they do not observe public health protocols and raise the probability of spreading the virus in the once insulated communities."

The policy of the NPA is to facilitate, not prevent, relief and assistance for the people, Valbuena said. He added that even some of the Duterte government's relief agencies cooperate with NPA units because the latter can bring relief to hinterland villages otherwise unreachable by the Manila government. Local government officials from some towns have also spoken out, denying that NPA units have stolen relief goods.

In the meantime, the Duterte government is clamping down on civic action groups conducting relief operations. On 19 April, elements of the Philippine National Police (PNP) arrested several volunteers, including former parliamentarian Ariel Casilao, in Bulacan province north of Manila, as they were set to deliver food relief to rural villages. They were charged for inciting to sedition, usurpation of authority and for being "unauthorized relief volunteers." Supporters successfully campaigned to have them released on bail on 22 April. **UP**



*Medicines not bullets! Hospitals not jail cells!  
Photo: bulatlat.com*

## Healthcare frontliners hardest hit in the Philippines

"We live in fear and have an invisible enemy". These are the words of a Filipino doctor describing the situation health workers and frontliners face in the Philippines as they battle Covid-19. The Duterte government lacks a comprehensive medical plan to deal with the pandemic, putting the lives of health workers in danger. There is not enough protective gear, equipment and supplies for the health workers. Many get their protective gear from private donations because the government cannot provide it for them.

The Alliance of Health Workers, a union of government and private health workers, has called for mass testing once every two weeks for frontliners, because of the unreliability of documenting their exposure to the virus due to the high patient load.

Health workers have held protest actions in their respective workplaces complaining of the increasing deaths among their ranks and calling for the realignment of intelligence funds for Covid-19 prevention. As of 29 April, 32 healthcare personnel have died due to the virus, amounting to 5.7% of the total Covid-19 deaths in the country.

The Philippines currently ranks highest in the world in the percentage of healthcare personnel dying due to Covid-19. According to the Department of Health, 1,552 healthcare personnel have tested positive, of which 548 are doctors and 571 are nurses. They comprise 19% of the total confirmed cases.

Despite the country's experience during the SARS crisis, the Manila government has been ill-prepared to deal with Covid-19. A major reason for this has been the cut in its public health program budget. Between 2016 – 2019, the budget has been cut from 15-28%. The budget for the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine, the lead public hospital taking care of Covid-19 patients, has been slashed from PhP263 million in 2019 to PhP115 million in 2020.

This cut has resulted in a lack of health workers and equipment even in normal times. There is only one doctor for 30,000 people. This has been exacerbated with the Covid-19 crisis. In Mindanao island, there is only one center which administers tests. Metro Manila has only a few test centers. There are not enough ventilators. There are only around 1000- 2000 ventilators throughout the country.

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President Duterte's response to this health crisis has been a military solution. He has threatened to declare martial law. He first ordered an 'enhanced community quarantine' (ECQ) which meant that people could not go out of their houses and he imposed a curfew. He banned public transportation. Armed police have set up checkpoints in many places in Metro Manila.

President Duterte has recently extended the enhanced community quarantine until 15 May and expanded the areas of concern, and has renamed it 'general community quarantine' (GCQ). The areas now include not only Metro Manila but also Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Benguet, Oriental and Occidental Mindoro, Albay and Catanduanes.

His reason for expanding this is to stop the spread of Covid-19. However these measures have meant that many people are going hungry. They are losing their livelihood. When they go out to look for food they are arrested. And the virus continues infecting people because they live in cramped quarters. **UP**



100% UNSAFE. Detainees crammed in a typical jail cell in the Philippines.

Photo: asianews.it

## Duterte government rejects release of political prisoners, sick and elderly

General Eduardo Año, Secretary of Interior in the Duterte government, declared in March, "Jails under our jurisdiction are 100 % safe!"

His preposterous declaration runs smack against the reality faced by Filipino prisoners. At least 387 out of 467 jails are posting a 450% congestion rate. This translates to six detainees occupying a space only meant for one.

Only 13 physicians attend to 47,326 prisoners nationwide in the country's seven penal colonies.

The pressure is mounting for the release of prisoners as the United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet issued a powerful call on 25 March 2020: "Governments must not forget those behind bars... the consequences of neglecting them are potentially catastrophic!"

In the Philippines, 22 political prisoners in the name of 609 political prisoners, filed a petition with the Supreme Court on 8 April for their temporary release and those who are sick and elderly as well as low-risk prisoners. The petition of the 22 political prisoners asks for release on bail.

The Office of the Solicitor General (OSG), through its head Jose Calida, told the Supreme Court that "the issue of the inadequacy of the Philippine prison system to meet the very high standard of international rules does not warrant the release of prisoners. The petitioners have not shown any complacency on the part of the State." The OSG head is under pressure, because the Justice Committee of the House of Representatives and the Bureau of Jail and Management Penology (BJMP) have expressed support to grant temporary releases to eligible prisoners as a means to decongest jails.

As the inadequacy of the Philippine prison system is exposed as the COVID-19 spreads and the ridiculous positions of former General Eduardo Año, and the weak objections of OSG's Jose Calida are exposed, the widespread support for the petition of the political prisoners gains ever stronger support. In reaction, the Duterte government has launched a massive vicious red-tagging campaign against members of the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL) who represent the political prisoners. The regime threatens to disbar them.

Subsequent to UN Human Rights Chairperson Bachelet's call for the release of prisoners, some governments started significant moves to release prisoners. In Iran where 190,000 are in prison, with 25,000 infected with the corona virus, the government announced it will temporarily release 85,000, with 10,000 granted pardons. The German state of North Westphalia announced on 25 March the release of 1,000 prisoners close to the end of their sentences. Earlier in Canada in the State of Ontario, 1,000 were released on 17 March. Similar moves are being made in the US State of New Jersey, as well as in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Poland and Italy, among others. **UP**