THE PHILIPPINES: ATTACKS AGAINST LAWYERS ESCALATING

17 September 2019 - We, the undersigned organizations, lawyers, and members of the legal profession, express deep concern over the increasing attacks against lawyers in the Philippines and the oppressive working environment they face since the start of President Duterte’s administration. We call on the Duterte Government to adequately protect the safety and independence of lawyers and end the culture of impunity in which these attacks occur.

Extrajudicial killings and harassment of lawyers

Since President Duterte took office on June 30, 2016, the number and intensity of attacks against lawyers have increased significantly. At least 41 lawyers and prosecutors were killed between July 2016 and 5 September 2019, including 24 practicing lawyers. Lawyers are also harassed and intimidated. They are subjected to (death) threats, surveillance, labelling, and other forms of attacks. In addition, at least five judges and retired judges have been murdered since July 2016, bringing the total number of jurists extrajudicially killed in the Philippines to at least 46 in the same period. Eight jurists survived attacks on their life.

Lawyers at risk

Most killings and attacks of lawyers took place as a result of discharging professional duties or are believed to be otherwise work-related. Especially at risk are lawyers representing people accused of terrorist or drug related crimes, or government critics, such as journalists, political opposition leaders, and human rights defenders. Lawyers providing legal representation in high-profile cases impacting established interests, such as land reform, or lawyers taking part in public discussion about human rights issues, also face reprisals.

Grave implications of threats and labelling

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, recently noted that senior officials of the Government of the Philippines have threatened lawyers and others who have spoken out against the administration’s policies, and she added that this “creates a very real risk of violence against them, and undermines rule of law, as well as the right to freedom expression”.

Prior to being attacked, some lawyers were labelled as “communist” or “terrorist” by state agents. The practice of labelling (i.e. classifying persons as “enemies of the state” or otherwise) combined with the culture of impunity was identified by national and international fact-finding missions as one of the main root causes of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines in the past and continues unabated.

Sharp deterioration of human rights

The attacks against lawyers, prosecutors and members of the judiciary and the extrajudicial killings of other human rights defenders in the Philippines during the past three years have occurred within the context of the so-called war on drugs and are being carried out across the country in an apparent climate of institutional impunity.
Concerned with the sharp deterioration of the human rights situation, eleven UN human rights experts, in a 7 June 2019 press release, called on the UN Human Rights Council to establish an independent investigation into human rights violations committed in the Philippines. “Instead of [the Government] sending a strong message that these killings and harassment are unacceptable, there is a rising rhetoric against independent voices in the country and ongoing intimidation and attacks against voices who are critical of the government, including independent media, human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists,” the experts said.

**Culture of Impunity**

The UN experts also noted that “the Government has shown no indication that they will step up to fulfil their obligation to conduct prompt and full investigations into these cases, and to hold perpetrators accountable in order to do justice for victims and to prevent reoccurrence of violations.”

**Consequences**

The attacks against and extra-judicial killings of lawyers and the impunity shielding perpetrators impair the ability of lawyers to provide effective legal representation, make lawyers increasingly wary of working on sensitive cases, and consequently severely undermine the proper functioning of the rule of law and the adequate protection of rights, including the right to remedies and fair trial.

**International obligations**

According to the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers (Basic Principles), States should ensure that all persons within their jurisdiction have effective and equal access to lawyers of their own choosing, and that lawyers are able to perform their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference. The Basic Principles require that lawyers are adequately protected when their security is threatened because of carrying out their legitimate professional duties, and not be identified with their clients or their clients’ causes. The Basic Principles affirm that lawyers, like other citizens, are entitled to freedom of expression and assembly. The duty to respect and guarantee these freedoms forms an integral part of the Philippines’ international legal obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

**Recommendations**

In view of the above, the undersigned organizations and individuals urge the Government of the Philippines to:

1. Investigate promptly, effectively, thoroughly and independently all extrajudicial killings and attacks against lawyers, and other jurists, with the aim of identifying those responsible and bringing them to justice in proceedings that respect international fair trial standards;
2. Take all reasonable measures to guarantee the safety and physical integrity of lawyers, including the provision of adequate protection measures, in consultation with the persons concerned;

3. Consistently condemn all forms of threats and attacks against lawyers publicly, at all political levels and in strong terms; and,

4. Fully comply with and create awareness about the core values underlying the legal profession, amongst others by bringing the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers to the attention of relevant stakeholders, especially members of the executive, police, and the military.

Organizations
(In alphabetic order)

Advocaten zonder Grenzen (Netherlands)  Association Européenne des Avocats -
European Association of Lawyers (AEA-
EAL)

Afrika Judges and Jurists Forum (AJJF)  Agora International Human Rights Group (Russia)
Amsterdamse orde van Advocaten - Amsterdam Bar Association (Netherlands)

Arrested Lawyers Initiative (Turkey)

Asia Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC)

Association of Lawyers for Freedom (ÖHD)

Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) (Belgium)
Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) (Switzerland)

Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC)

Barcelona Bar Association

Barreau de Lyon (France)

Berlin Bar Association

Cameroon Bar Association - Ordre des Avocats au Barreau de Cameroun
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Democratic Lawyers Association of Pakistan

Endangered Lawyers (Italy)

Estonian Bar Association

European Association of Lawyers for Democracy & Human Rights (ELDH)

European Criminal Bar Association (ECBA)
Vincent Asselineau, Chair
Scott Crosby, Human Rights Officer

European Democratic Lawyers (AED)
Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers (United Kingdom)
Michael Goold, Vice Chair

Hong Kong Bar Association (HKBA)
Mr. Philip Dykes, Chairman

Human Rights Embassy (Moldova)
Lela Metreveli, Executive Director

Ilustre Colegio de Abogados de Lima Sur (Peru)
Dr. Vicente Paul Espinoza Santillán, President

Confederation of Lawyers of Asia and the Pacific

Indian Association of Lawyers (member of COLAB)

International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL)
Japan Lawyers International Solidarity Association (JALISA)

Judges for Judges (Netherlands)

l'Institut des droits de l'homme des Avocats européens (IDHAE)

Law Bureau of the Oppressed – Ezilenlerin Hukuk Bürosu (EHB)

Law Council of Australia
Mr. Arthur Moses SC, President

Law Society of England and Wales
Law Society of Ontario (Canada)  Lawyers Association RAV (Germany)

Lawyers for Lawyers (Netherlands)  Lawyers Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)
Irma van den Berg, President

Le Barreau du Kasai Central (Congo)  Lithuanian Bar Association
Prof. dr. Ignas Végélė, Chairman of the Bar Council
New Zealand Law Society

Orde van Advocaten Den Haag - The Hague Bar Association (Netherlands)

Orde van Advocaten Noord-Nederland - Bar Association North Netherlands

Orde van Advocaten Overijssel – The Overijssel Bar Association (Netherlands)

Ordre des Avocats Vaudois (Switzerland)

Paris Bar - Barreau de Paris (France)
Polish Bar Council - Naczelna Rada Adwokacka
Prof. Piotr Kardas, Vice President

Portuguese Bar Association
Mr. Guilherme de Figueiredo, President

Progressive Lawyers Association (PLA)

Slovak Bar Association - Slovenská advokátska komora

Solicitor’s International Human Rights Group (SIHRG) (United Kingdom)

Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network
Southern Africa Litigation Centre

Spanish National Bar Association

Surinaamse Orde van Advocaten – Surinam Bar Association

Swedish Bar Association
Mia Edwall Insulander, Secretary General

Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (Thailand)

The Norwegian Bar Association, Human Rights Committee
Individual signatures from members of the legal profession
(in alphabetic order of last name)

Mr. Jalel Akram

Mr. George S. Akst, New York, NY, United States of America

Mr. Eric Alves de Souza, Geneva, Switzerland

Ms. Silvina Zhivkova Bakardzhieva, Varna, Bulgaria

Mr. Joël Beauchamp, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Mr. Maxim Belinschi, Chisinau, Moldova

Mr. Vladimir Beljanski, Novi Sad, Serbia
Mr. Roudy Berthomieux, Port-au-Prince, Haiti
Ms. Stefania Besson, Turin, Italy
Ms. Laurence Bory, Geneva, Switzerland
Mr. Carl-Olof Bouveng, Stockholm, Sweden
Mr. Roberto Brizio, Turin, Italy
Mr. Aldo Bulgarelli, Verona, Italy
Mr. Sayma Syrenius Cephus
Ms. Nayla Charabaty, Jdeidet el-Matn, Lebanon
Mr. Hervé Chemouli, Paris, France
Ms. Marie-Christine Cimadevilla, Paris, France
Mr. Simon Curtis, London, United Kingdom
Mr. Pedro Da Silva Neves, Geneva, Switzerland
Mr. Corrado De Martini, Roma, Italy
Mr. Ryan Deane, London, United Kingdom
Mr. Dede Diangienda Biku, Kinshasa Matete, Democratic Republic of Congo
Mr. Waly Mamadi Diawara, Bamako, Mali
Ms. Angela Díaz-Bastien Vargas-Zúñiga, Madrid, Spain
Mr. Wanderley Romano Donadel, Uberlandia, Brazil
Dr. Agnès Christine Dormann, Bâle, Switzerland
Mr. Andreas Dracoulis, London, United Kingdom
Mr. Mahmoud El Hendawy, Alexandria, Egypt
Ms. Francesca Ferrario, Milan, Italy
Mr. Jun Fu, Guangzhou, Guangdong, The People's Republic of China (PRC)
Ms. Agnieszka Gasiorowska, Turin, Italy
Ms. Julie Goffin, Brussels, Belgium
Mr. Yasushi Higashizawa, Tokyo, Japan
Ms. Daniela Horvitz Lennon, Santiago, Chile
Mr. Dilman L. Hussen, Sulaymaniyyah, Kurdistan, Iraq
Mr. Mathieu Jacques, Montreal, Québec, Canada
Mr. Charles Kignima, Abijan, Côte d'Ivoire
Mr. Peter Kun, Budapest, Hungary
Mr. Etienne Lesage, Paris, France
Mr. Gavin Llewellyn, London, United Kingdom
Ms. Camille Loup, Geneva, Switzerland
Ms. Jeanne Machado, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Mr. Federico Magliano, Turin, Italy
Mr. Roland Makigho Vega, Bamenda, Cameroon
Mr. Jorge Martí Moreno, Valencia, Spain
Mr. Jorge Molano, Bogota, Colombia
Mr. James C. Moore, Pittsford, NY, United States of America
Mr. Jonathan Morton, London, United Kingdom
Mr. Cedrick Mpiutu Nzenge, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo
Ms. Janice F. Mulligan, San Diego, CA, United States of America
Dr. Ulrich Münzer, Stuttgart, Germany
Ms. Catherine Yvette Njine, Yaoundé, Cameroon
Mr. Fulbert Nzalakanda, Pointe-Noire, Republic of Congo
Mr. Pedro Pais de Almeida, Lisbon, Portugal
Mr. José Pajares Echeverría, Zaragoza, Spain
Mr. Sergio Passoni, Turin, Italy
Ms. Isabel Peña Sastre, Barcelona, Spain
Mr. André Joël Petit-Homme, Petion-Ville, Haiti
Mr. Mohammed Rachidi, Casablanca, Morocco
Mr. Bradley Richards, London, United Kingdom
Dr. Mirko Roš, Geneva, Switzerland
Ms. Jacqueline R. Scott, Washington, DC, United States of America
Mr. Marc-André Séguin, Montreal, Canada
Mr. Andreas Silcher, London, United Kingdom
Mr. Howard S. Simmons, Brampton, Ontario, Canada
Mr. Avninder Singh, New Dehli, India
Mr. Rupinder Singh Suri, New Dehli, India
Mr. Nicola Stella, Turin, Italy
Ms. Sibylle Théard Mevs, Port-au-Prince, Haiti
Ms. Leslie K. L. Thiele, Albany, NY, United States of America
Mr. Abdelkader Tibri, Tenes, Algeria
Mr. Țurcan Veaceslav, Chisinau, Moldava
Ms. Liudmila Ulyashyna, Oslo, Norway
Mr. Frank Van Vlaenderen, Ghent, Belgium
Mr. Pascal Vanderveeren, Brussels, Belgium
Mr. Pierre Viviani, Nice, France
Ms. Melanie Willems, London, United Kingdom