

23 August 2017

Philippines: Two human rights defenders threatened and intimidated by suspected government security forces

On 16 August 2017, the human rights organisation Karapatan submitted a complaint to the Philippines Commission on Human Rights regarding threats, harassment and intimidation experienced by two human rights defenders from suspected government security forces. On 20 July 2017, Karapatan Secretary General Cristina “Tinay” Palabay received a threatening phone call ordering her to stop her human rights work in the wake of martial law in the southern Mindanao region. On 18 July 2017, Defend Ilocos coordinator, Sherwin de Vera, was followed by men in military uniforms in Vigan City. The following day, he learned that army personnel had enquired about his activities at the city’s university after he visited their campus.

[Cristina “Tinay” Palabay](#) is the Secretary General of [Karapatan](#), an alliance of individuals, groups and organisations working to promote and protect human rights in the Philippines. She is also a member of an organising committee for the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, an advisor to the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Rights, and Karapatan’s representative on an international coordinating group, including Front Line Defenders, on a global campaign to stop the killings of human rights defenders. Cristina Palabay additionally serves on the Joint Monitoring Committee as an independent observer of the peace agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, ensuring that international human rights and humanitarian law standards are upheld in the peace process.

[Sherwin De Vera](#) is the coordinator of Defend Ilocos, a regional environmental network in north western Philippines affiliated with Kalikasan People’s Network for the Environment. The organisation is currently leading a campaign against large-scale mining projects in the region that would be detrimental to local communities’ right to a safe and healthy environment. The human rights defender is also a former human rights worker of Karapatan.

On 20 July 2017, at around 10:20pm, Cristina Palabay received a threatening call on her personal phone from an unidentified man. After repeatedly asking if she was “Tinay Palabay”, the man ordered her to stop her work as a human rights defender, arguing that “times have changed since martial law is in place”. Cristina Palabay was also warned that she was on their “list” of people they consider as “courageous” and that she should be cautious because he would soon be meeting her. The man refused to give his name, however an online search suggested that the calling number was registered to a member of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Safety Battalion.

On 18 July 2017, Sherwin De Vera was tailed by men in military uniforms when he visited Vigan City. On 19 July, the defender was informed by friends from the University of Northern Philippines that suspected military intelligence personnel had visited the university the previous day to ask the campus security department about Sherwin De Vera’s recent visit to the university.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned about the situation of human rights defenders in the Philippines, especially following the declaration of martial law in Mindanao in May 2017. Human rights groups in the Philippines have expressed their concern that martial law may be extended nationwide, which would further jeopardize the psychological and physical security of human rights defenders in the country.

In its 2017 Annual Report, Front Line Defenders reported 281 killings of human rights defenders worldwide. 31 of those killings took place in the Philippines, making it the most dangerous country for human rights defenders in Asia. Environmental, land and indigenous rights defenders in particular have been increasingly targeted with threats, attacks, intimidation and harassment from military agents as part of a larger crackdown on civil society.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a press release on 31 July 2017, noting “the increasing levels of violence, killings, intimidation and harassment being suffered by human rights defenders – including those protecting indigenous peoples - trade union organizers, farmers and their family members.” The UN experts urged the Philippines Government to “ensure effective protection of individuals and groups who may be subject to extra-legal, arbitrary or summary executions, or those who received death threats”.

Front Line Defenders condemns the acts of intimidation and threats against human rights defenders Cristina Palabay and Sherwin de Vera, which it believes were solely motivated by their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities in the Philippines.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Philippines to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against Cristina “Tinay” Palabay, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Cristina Palabay and Sherwin de Vera;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in the Philippines are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.