

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Philippines > Mindanao (Philippines) > Epidemics, pandemics (health, Mindanao) > **In the Philippines, Duterte gov't took advantage of pandemic to continue (...)**

In the Philippines, Duterte gov't took advantage of pandemic to continue drug killings, abuses - HRW

Saturday 27 March 2021, by [GAVILAN Jodesz](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2021).

Contents

- [No accountability](#)
- [Further abuse](#)

MANILA, Philippines

A new Human Rights Watch report highlights the further deterioration of the human rights situation in the Philippines amid the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic didn't stop the Duterte administration from carrying out massive human rights abuses, New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in its report released on Wednesday, January 13.

The situation in the country, according to HRW's World Report 2021, further deteriorated in 2020 as President Rodrigo Duterte continued his violent anti-drug campaign and crackdown on dissent.

The HRW report highlighted that drug war killings increased during the COVID-19 lockdown, with "almost total impunity" seen in the country.

HRW deputy Asia director Phil Robertson said the government "appeared to take advantage" of COVID-19 regulations to expand the "gruesome and bloody" war on drugs.

"The Philippines' guidelines and movement controls during quarantine were a boon for killers continuing the war on drugs, resulting in a significant uptick in deaths," Robertson said in a press conference.

"Victims were sitting ducks, unable to run and hide."

Government data show at least 5,980 people have been killed during police anti-drug operations as of November 30, 2020. This number does not include victims of vigilante-style killings, which human rights groups estimate to reach at least 27,000.

No accountability

The HRW report also blasted the lack of accountability over the thousands of killings under Duterte's drug war. Since 2016, only one case has led to a conviction - the killing of 17-year-old Kian delos Santos in 2017. (READ: Duterte gov't allows 'drug war' deaths to go unsolved)

In June 2020, the Department of Justice announced the creation of an inter-agency panel that will review more than 5,000 deaths in police operations. After missing its first deadline in November 2020 [1], the panel submitted its “initial report” to President Rodrigo Duterte early January.

The panel was also blasted by human rights groups as an effort to evade accountability. It was created following a scathing report by United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet that said local systems have so far failed to exact accountability for the killings.

Bachelet also said the drug war is being carried out “without due regard for the rule of law, due process, and the human rights of people. [2]”

“The creation of a committee to investigate cases of police involvement in killings, originally pledged by the secretary of justice to the UN Human Rights Council, is of doubtful utility given the prominent role of key agencies responsible for killings in the committee’s leadership,” HRW said in its report.

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) was also excluded from the initial review of the killings [3], despite the Philippine government assuring the UN of the commission’s role.

HRW’s Robertson said the CHR’s exclusion reflects Duterte’s “contempt” for the independent commission.

“The fact that they were left out in the role that they were promised is outrageous, unacceptable, and once again shows the lack of good faith by the government of Duterte in responding to pressure by the international community,” he said.

Further abuse

Aside from the relentless war on drugs, the HRW report also highlighted the attacks on press freedom in 2020, including the cyber libel conviction of Rappler chief executive officer Maria Ressa [4] and former writer-researcher Reynaldo Santos Jr, the shutdown of broadcasting giant ABS-CBN, and the killings of journalists.

The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines said 19 journalists have been killed since Duterte assumed office in 2016, as of November 2020 [5].

Attacks on press freedom exist alongside red-tagging of human rights defenders and activists, especially in the aftermath of the signing of the anti-terror law. (READ: Duterte ushers in new level of danger for activists, human rights defenders [6])

“The military, national security agencies, and the police have actively used social media to convey threats that have resulted in tens of red-tagged people being killed in the past year,” the HRW report said.

The coronavirus lockdown also led to massive arrests and abuse by state forces since it was first implemented in March 2020. Between March and November, at least 134,298 were arrested for allegedly violating community quarantine guidelines.

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To improve the situation, HRW said, it is high time for the international community, including the UN and the International Criminal Court - to hold the Duterte administration accountable.

“The Philippines is in a major human rights crisis and we believe this requires prioritization by the international community to make sure that people behind these are held accountable regardless of their position,” Robertson said.

Jodesz Gavilan

@jodeszgavilan

View the full report here:

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021>

P.S.

- Rappler.com. Jan 13, 2021 8:00 PM PHT:
<https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-government-took-advantage-covid-19-pandemic-continue-drug-war-killings-abuses-hrw-report-2020>
 - Jodesz Gavilan is a writer and researcher for Rappler and its investigative arm, Newsbreak. She covers human rights and also hosts the weekly podcast Newsbreak: Beyond the Stories. She joined Rappler in 2014 after obtaining her journalism degree from the University of the Philippines.
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/philippines-may-miss-november-deadline-drug-war-review>
- [2] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/un-rights-chief-bachelet-says-no-rule-of-law-due-process-duterte-drug-war>
- [3] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/chr-excluded-drug-war-review-panel-department-justice>
- [4] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/maria-ressa-reynaldo-santos-jr-convicted-cyber-libel-case-june-15-2020>
- [5] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/masbate-journalist-ronnie-villamor-shot-dead-november-2020>
- [6] <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/rodrigo-duterte-ushers-new-level-danger-activists-human-rights-defenders>