

Philippines: Senator Leila de Lima who branded President Duterte 'serial killer' arrested

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Senator Leila de Lima taken into custody on charges of drug trafficking, outraging supporters and human rights activists.

The highest-profile critic of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's brutal drug war was arrested on Friday on charges she said were meant to silence her, but she vowed to keep fighting the "sociopathic serial killer".

Speaking to journalists minutes before armed police in flak jackets detained her, Senator Leila de Lima insisted she was innocent of the drug trafficking charges that could see her jailed for life.

"It is my honour to be imprisoned for the things I am fighting for. Please pray for me," De Lima said outside her Senate office where she had sought temporary refuge overnight after an arrest warrant was issued on Thursday.

"They will not be able to silence me and stop me from fighting for the truth and justice and against the daily killings and repression by the Duterte regime."

De Lima had appealed late on Thursday night for police not to arrest her overnight, and committed to surrendering on Friday. "If they respect the Senate as an institution, they should not force an arrest tonight," she told reporters.

When Friday morning came reporters had gathered in their dozens and watched as De Lima was escorted from her office into a waiting police minibus.

De Lima recorded a video just before her arrest as she called for ordinary Filipinos to show courage and oppose Duterte's drug war, which has seen more than 6,500 people killed since he took office eight months ago.

"There is no doubt that our president is a murderer and a sociopathic serial killer," she said in the 10-minute video that was posted on her Facebook page.

De Lima, a former human rights commissioner, also said her arrest was an act of revenge for her decade-long efforts to expose Duterte as the leader of death squads during his time as mayor of southern Davao city.

Duterte first raised allegations in August that De Lima had been running a drug trafficking ring with criminals inside the nation's biggest prison when she was the justice secretary in the previous government of Benigno Aquino.

"I will have to destroy her in public," Duterte said then as he began a campaign to tarnish her reputation, including by making unsubstantiated allegations about her sex life.

De Lima was last week charged with three counts of drug trafficking.

She and her supporters insisted that Duterte orchestrated the charges not just to crush her opposition, but also to intimidate anyone else who may want to speak out against the president or his drug war.

"People are afraid," Father Robert Reyes, an activist priest who spent the night at the Senate with De Lima and other supporters, told AFP after her arrest. "If the government can arrest a powerful person like her, what more the little man? That is the implied message of her arrest."

Vice-president Leni Robredo, a member of De Lima's opposition Liberal party and elected separately from Duterte, described the arrest as "political harassment".

De Lima's Liberal party, which ruled for six years under Aquino, voiced deep anger. "This arrest is purely political vendetta and has no place in [a] justice system that upholds the rule of law. This is condemnable. We reiterate that an arrest based on trumped-up charges is illegal," it said in a statement.

The party also said it feared for De Lima's life, citing the police killing of another politician, Rolando Espinosa, inside a jail cell in November last year after he was arrested on drug charges [\[1\]](#).

The National Bureau of Investigation said the police who raided the jail murdered him and that he was defenceless. But Duterte defended the police and vowed they would not be jailed.

Amnesty International said on Thursday that it would regard De Lima as a prisoner of conscience. "The arrest of De Lima is a blatant attempt by the Philippine government to silence criticism of President Duterte and divert attention away from serious human rights violations in the 'war on drugs'," it said.

Duterte's aides insisted they had a strong case against De Lima and said her arrest showed even the most powerful people would be brought to justice if they broke the law.

"The war on illegal drugs targets all who are involved and the arrest of an incumbent senator demonstrates the president's strong resolve to fight pushers, peddlers and their protectors," presidential spokesman Ernesto Abella said.

Duterte won the presidential election last year after promising during the campaign to eradicate drugs in society by killing tens of thousands of people.

He launched the crackdown immediately after taking office in June and police have reported killing 2,555 drug suspects since then, with about 4,000 other people murdered in unexplained circumstances.

Amnesty has warned that police actions in the drug war may amount to crimes against humanity.

Duterte has variously denied and acknowledged his role in death squads in Davao. As president he has repeatedly urged police to kill drug addicts as well as traffickers.

But Duterte's aides insist he has never broken any laws.

P.S.

* The Guardian. Thursday 23 February 2017 23.10 GMT Last modified on Friday 24 February 2017 06.15 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/24/philippines-senator-leila-de-lima-president-duterte-serial-killer-faces-arrest>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/05/philippines-mayor-accused-of-drug-trafficking-killed-in-prison-shootout>