

Philippine government bans 500 critics

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More than 500 people, including a former US attorney general, were on a Philippine government blacklist banned from entering the country because of supposed links to terrorist groups, an international human rights group said Friday.

Human Rights Watch said in a statement it obtained a copy of a Philippine government blacklist banning 504 people from more than 50 countries said to have al-Qaeda or Taliban links from entering the country in July and August.

But many of those on the list were human rights advocates including former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, Human Rights Watch said, accusing the Philippines of using the list to stop critics of the government entering the country.

"Labeling peaceful critics as al-Qaeda or Taliban only serves to sap public confidence in counter-terror measures and exposes them as a cover for suppressing dissent," Sophie Richardson, Human Rights Watch Asia advocacy director, said.

"The government's blacklisting of its critics is shocking in a country that prides itself on being a democracy that values free speech.

"Many people on this blacklist have done little more than criticize the government or work to protect Filipinos from the country's abusive security forces."

The Bureau of Immigration and Department of Justice blacklist includes expatriate Filipinos and members of US-based organizations such as Church World Service, the Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, the National Lawyers Guild and the Center for Constitutional Rights.

It also includes individuals working for the International Labor Solidarity Mission, and from Philippine unions and civil society organizations such as the left-wing political group Bayan and women's group Gabriela.

Human Rights Watch said the blacklist came into effect on July 24 and was "apparently" lifted on August 10.

"According to a Philippines foreign ministry official, the list was put in place at the time of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) ministerial meeting held in Manila from July 21 to August 2," Human Rights Watch said.

"Since the government did not publicly announce the blacklist, it is not clear whether this or any other blacklist is in effect at present."

The rights group called on Philippines President Gloria Arroyo to clarify whether any blacklists were still in effect and to make a commitment to end bans on nonviolent government critics.

P.S.

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http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2007/sept/29/yehey/top_stories/20070929top4.html