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President
Président
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Sylvestre H. Bello III

Secretary
Dept. of Labour and Employment
Intramuros
Manila
Philippines

Sharan Burrow

General Secretary
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Secretaria General

HTUR

15 March 2021

New assassinations of trade union leaders and activists

Dear Secretary Bello,

The ITUC condemns yet another wave of attacks and violence unleashed by the military of the Philippines against labour and trade union organisers during so-called counter insurgency actions on 7 March. This brazen attack is a further escalation of trade union repression and human rights violations; as are the red-tagging of various trade unions, intimidation of labour leaders and the assassinations of human rights lawyers. The violent repression is now spreading around the country in alarming proportions.

Nine human rights activists in southern Tagalog - including the labour activist and coordinator of the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) alliance, Emmanuel Manny Asuncion - were killed, and six trade union leaders and representatives have been arrested in Laguna. The operations and deaths were confirmed by the Philippine National Police and Armed Forces of the Philippines (PNP-AFP). They took place two days after President Duterte's address to the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) in Cagayan de Oro City. The President instructed the police and army officers to kill armed rebels and communists who they encounter.

The UN OHCHR has pointed out that the arrest warrants issued in the context of 'counter insurgency' operations are often conducted at night and have resulted in killings. The ITUC is deeply troubled by the impunity of open sanctioning and executions without regard to due process and without distinction.

We note with grave concern the escalation of the NTF-ELCAC's operations in southern Tagalog, Laguna and Manila. The task force's operations have aggravated the environment of physical violence and put the personal security of trade unionists and labour advocates under imminent threat when legitimately exercising the rights protected by ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and other civil liberties under international human rights instruments.

The NTF-ELCAC was established in 2018 and chaired by the President.. The task force lacks transparency, accountability, and human rights safeguards to ensure the consistent implementation of the inter-ministerial framework on the protection of freedom of association that should guide the behaviour of the officers of the Department of National Defence and the PNP-AFP in carrying out its duties.

The ITUC notes with alarm at the further proliferation of the practice of red-tagging of trade unionists in

Davao. We are informed that PNP-AFP officers acting in the capacity of the ELCAC are labelling independent trade union leaders as members of the communist party and the red army and forcing them to disband their union. Members of trade unions and their families have been harassed to disaffiliate and stop joining the union activities. These harassments and intimidations carried out at the workplaces and workers' communities in the industrial zones as part of the NTF-ELCAC's 'industrial peace' mission are clear interferences in industrial relations.

The ITUC also condemns the targeting of human rights lawyers following the 7 March operations. It has been confirmed to the ITUC that human rights lawyers have become the target of red-tagging too, as the PNP-AFP is interfering with the judiciary in Calbayog city to extract information about the lawyers representing defendants who have allegedly been associated with the communist party.

We recall that the Committee of Freedom of Association of the ILO has considered that vilification and assimilation of workers, trade unions and activities to terrorists, violates freedom from discrimination of political opinion and creates an environment of intimidation in violation of the ILO Convention No.87 (CFA Case 3119, Section 668, 670).

The ITUC condemn the red-tagging's, arrests and killings of trade unionists and human rights defenders that have accelerated over the last year while the working people of the Philippines have been suffering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, your government is yet to officially accept the ILO High Level Tripartite Mission to implement the conclusions of the International Labour Conference Committee on the Application of Standards regarding Convention No.87 in 2019.

The Government of the Philippines must immediately take effective measures to prevent violence against trade unionists and ensure independent investigations into the allegations of human rights violations.

We urge the DOLE to convene without delay the High-Level Monitoring Body of the National Tripartite Industrial Peace Council to review the applicability of the freedom of association guidelines with the NTF-ELCAC and the Department of National Defence, and to investigate and hold accountable the PNP-AFP officers involved in the killings and arrests of trade union leaders, including those involved in the NTF-ELCAC's operations on 7 March.

We further urge the DOLE to officially accept the ILO High Level Tripartite Mission without further delay and proceed to discuss the mission on a clear timeline with the ILO, the affiliates of the ITUC and the Global Union Federations in the Philippines.

The ITUC requests an official reply from you and a virtual meeting with the embassy of the Philippines in Belgium to raise the above matters.

Yours sincerely,



General Secretary

Cc: Ambassador of the Philippines in Belgium; Mr Eduardo Jose DE VEGA