



Human Rights Newsletter
Philippines

Welcome to the AMP Newsletter 06/2020!

Dear reader,

the past weeks have been an escalation in terms of the health crisis, shrinking civil spaces and press freedom in the Philippines. We give you an overview over the recent developments including corona-related human rights topics like overcrowded prisons and inadequate aid-programs, the state of press freedom in the Philippines and the possible "new normal" for human rights defenders due to the so called anti-terror bill.

The UN report on the human rights situation in the Philippines was discussed on June 30, 2020 in Geneva, and has already been published on June 4, 2020. We give you an overview over the current debate, stakeholders and their statements.

Also note the Asienhaus homepage Corona in Asien (German) which gathers perspectives on civil society from several Asian countries amid the corona pandemic.

AMP Current Topics

- [OHCHR report on human rights situation in the Philippines at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva](#)
- [State of Media Freedom in PH: Maria Ressa indicted for cyber libel](#)
- [The New Anti-Terrorism Bill in the Philippines: A threat to everyone](#)

Press Review on the Weakening of Human Rights amid Corona

COVID-19 still dominates not only media coverage all over the world, but also the circumstances under which people in the Philippines manage their lives. Concerns were raised by human rights groups and political institutions like the United Nations regarding the civic and social human rights sphere early in the chronology of the pandemic. Unfortunately, one must admit that in the Philippines these concerns were more than justified. Below you find a press review of the dominating concerns due to the weakening of human rights amid Corona. Current infection numbers can be accessed [here](#).

- [Continuing Lockdown/Crackdown](#)
- [The problem of slow and insufficient aid distribution](#)
- [Philippine prisons as a Covid-19 hotspot](#)
- [Schools and universities to be closed until vaccine is found](#)

The NPA and the Philippine Military

The fighting among the New People's Army's armed groups and the Philippine military continues. Although the number of NPA rebels has drastically decreased in the last years, the military's rhetoric against communism is as strong as ever. Any person standing in the way of the objectives of President Duterte is subject to being "red-tagged", branded as having ties to the communist rebels. Communism, rather than being an actual threat to Duterte's government, has become a political tool to keep his critics at bay.

- [16 NPA rebels killed: Rebel numbers decline but the fight against](#)

- [communism remains strong](#)
- [Killings, abductions and harassment continue amid pandemic](#)

Read also:

- [Senator Leila de Lima seeks bail](#)

Corona in Asien (German)

Menschenrechte, politische Systeme, soziale Ungleichheit, internationale Solidarität und die Umwelt im Spiegel der Corona-Pandemie

Die Corona-Pandemie entlarvt die Ungerechtigkeiten der globalen Ordnung besonders deutlich. Nicht nur Staaten unterscheiden sich fundamental darin wie sie ausgestattet sind, um die Gesundheit ihrer Bevölkerung zu schützen bzw. wiederherzustellen. Sondern jede*r Einzelne ist der Pandemie unterschiedlich ausgesetzt, abhängig von Klasse, Herkunft, Race oder Geschlecht. Die Corona-Pandemie muss als Wendepunkt genutzt werden, um die globale Ordnung zu verändern und menschen-, sozial- und umweltgerechter zu gestalten.

Die Stiftung Asienhaus und das philippinenbüro sammeln auf dieser Seite zivilgesellschaftliche Länderperspektiven, um Handlungsoptionen für eine gerechtere Welt und internationale Solidarität zu finden. Im Vordergrund steht dabei die Frage was die Corona-Pandemie für die Menschen im Globalen Süden bedeutet. Diese möchten wir mit Hilfe von fünf Themen und aus der Sicht ausgewählter Länder in Asien beantworten.

Hier geht's zur neuen Homepage über Corona in Asien

AMP Current Topics

OHCHR report on human rights situation in the Philippines at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Michelle Bachelet, [published the report on the situation of human rights in the Philippines](#) on June 4, 2020 in accordance with the [UN resolution 41/2](#), adopted by the Human Rights Council on July 11, 2019 at the forty-first session. Last Friday, June 26, 2020, [30 UN Special Rapporteurs published a joint statement](#) calling for an on-the-ground independent, impartial investigation. [On June 30, 2020](#), the HC report on the human rights situation in the Philippines was subject to an Enhanced Interactive Dialogue during the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. [HC Michelle Bachelet gave a statement](#) on the situation of human rights in the Philippines, where she explicitly referred to the anti-terror bill that "heightens our concerns about the blurring of important distinctions between criticism, criminality and terrorism." [The Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development \(APWLD\) submitted a written statement in beforehand](#) and drew special attention to the worsening human rights situation in the Philippines amid the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The [International Federation for Human Rights \(FIDH\)](#) and [CIVICUS together with Karapatan](#) gave an oral statement. On June 29, 2020 [CIVICUS](#) had already put the Philippines on their Monitor Watch List due to serious concerns regarding the exercise of civic freedoms. CIVICS mentions the restrictions on press freedom, the deteriorating situation for human rights defenders and the threat through the new anti-terror bill. Finally, [Senator Leila de Lima published a statement, on June 30, 2020](#), "in support of the call to establish an independent international investigation into human rights violations in the Philippines and to expedite the proceedings in the International Criminal Court".

According to the programme of work of the 44th session of the human rights council (draft as of June 29, 2020) decisions and conclusions are scheduled for July 17, 2020. That is when the decision about the "strengthening of the OHCHR mandate to continue its monitoring and reporting on the human rights violations in the Philippines" - as the group of Special Rapporteurs urges in their joint statement - will be made.

Further information:

[Rappler Investigative Coverage: Duterte's war on dissent](#)

[Rappler on Michelle Bachelet's statement not to sign anti-terror bill](#)

State of Media Freedom in PH: Maria Ressa indicted for cyber libel

Journalism in the Philippines remains a high-risk activity. The Philippines rank 136 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom 2020 index and had already deteriorated compared to rank 134 in 2019 before the recent shutdown of ABS-CBN and the verdict against Maria Ressa. On May 5, 2020, the franchise of ABS-CBN, the biggest broadcaster in the Philippines, was not renewed, following allegations of foreign ownership and fraudulent business models. ABS-CBN has already gone off-air one other time in its history: the first time was in 1972, when dictator Marcos imposed martial law. On June 15, 2020, in an attempt to silence one of the most critical and globally popular voices among the Philippine media, founder and CEO of Rappler, Maria Ressa, and former Rappler researcher Reynaldo Santos Jr. were convicted of cyber libel. Already in 2017, during this second annual State of the Nation Address, President Duterte had accused Rappler of foreign ownership. Since then, Rappler was subjected to a barrage of harassment and intimidation by the administration, which was criticized by several UN Special Rapporteurs. The Philippine Government is intimidating journalists and ceasing broadcasters during the COVID-19 pandemic, where critical and factual media coverage is essential to the population

The newest level of escalation in the context of press freedom in the Philippines began on June 15, when editor of the news website Rappler, Maria Ressa and her colleague Reynaldo Santos Jr. were found guilty of cyber libel, facing up to six years in prison. Since Ressa's conviction last year and due to her longstanding career as a mostly investigative working journalist she has been a popular figure fighting for the freedom of speech and press freedom in the Philippines around the world. Several rights groups and media people have spoken out, claiming that Ressa's and Reynaldo's conviction proves to be another attack of the Duterte administration against the freedom of the Filipino people. The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) said that the conviction shows that the state actively manipulates and weaponizes to law to silence the media. Other journalists now face the fears that their older and not-yet digitized articles could also make them vulnerable to cyber libel.

The Philippine government is further cracking down on journalists critical of the government's Covid-19 response and seriously threatening press freedom, the rights to free expression and access to information. Amid the lockdown, Reporters Without Borders have published their new ranking of the World Press Freedom Index, where the Philippines again slipped by two places, just one of many indicators how spaces of freedom of expression and press freedom are further restricted in the fourth year of Duterte's presidency. The Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) has published a report that highlights the increasing difficulty of access to information, increased and furthered by the Duterte administration's quarantine measures. The threats and attacks against journalists continue during the health crisis: In May, Dumaguete radio broadcaster Rex Cornelio was shot dead on his motorcycle. Just days later, his colleague Roy August Bustillo received a similar death threat.

Futher information:

[World Press Freedom Index 2020](#)

[OHCHR on harassment against Rappler on Januar 25, 2018](#)

[Rappler: Leni Robredo on verdict of Maria Ressa](#)

[Rappler: 12-year prescription for cyber libel unconstitutional](#)

[The Guardian: an attack on democracy](#)

[The Guardian: Maria Ressa's conviction should matter to everone who cares about democracy](#)

[Rappler: EU urges Philippines to protect press freedom](#)

[Bulatlat: 6 questions on Rappler, cyber libel and press freedom](#)

[Human Rights Watch: Rappler Verdict a blow for media freedom](#)

[Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility: Shutdown of ABS-CBN](#)

[BBC: ABS-CBM off-air](#)

[Davao Today: Silencing of Philippine Media](#)

[Rappler: Chilling effect of Maria Ressa's verdict for cyber libel on other journalists](#)

[Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility: Dumaguete radio broadcaster shot dead](#)

[Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility: Dumaguete radio broadcaster gets death threat](#)

[PCIJ: Quarantine curbs access to information](#)

The New Anti-Terrorism Bill in the Philippines: A threat to everyone

At the beginning of June, the House of Representatives voted to adopt the new draft legislation issued by the Senate in February to amend the existing anti-terror law in the Philippines. The Philippine government has said that the final bill is to be approved and implemented in a fast-track procedure in the following weeks and months. The Palace stated that the motivation for the quick implementation of the bill is the urgency of the situation in especially Southern Philippine regions, where most rebels of the New People's Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, are located.

The so-called anti-terror bill comprises the Senate Bill No. 1083 and the House Bill No. 6875 and is supposed to substitute and amend the 2007 Human Security Act. It constitutes a new threat to human rights defenders in the Philippines and those who travel to the Philippines. Legal experts are concerned that the „terrorist tag“ could be the new normal in the way the government proceeds with its critics and with human rights defenders, also those of international institutions.

In the statement UN High Commission for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, gave on June 30, 2020 when she presented the report to resolution 41/2 on the Philippines to the UN Human Rights Council (OHCHR), she expressed that “the new Anti-Terrorism Act heightens our concerns about the blurring of important distinctions between criticism, criminality and terrorism.”

Further information:

[Statement of Michelle Bachelet, 30.06.2020](#)

[Rappler: Michelle Bachelet urges Duterte not to sign Anti-Terror Bill](#)

[Davao Today on attack of free speech in anti-terror bill](#)

[New York Times: Dissenters may face terrorist designation](#)

[Asia Times: New security law harsher](#)

[The Guardian: broad anti-terrorism law takes aim at dissent](#)

[Statement Human Rights Watch Online Philippines](#)

[Senator Leila de Lima on Rappler: Anti-Terror or Anti-Filipino?](#)

[Rappler: Duterte "inclined" to sign anti-terror-bill](#)

[Rappler: Comparing dangers in old and new anti-terror bill](#)

[Rappler: Anti-Terror Bill worse than martial law](#)

[Rappler: Human rights lawyers on anti-terror bill](#)

Press Review

The Weakening of Human Rights amid Corona

Continuing Lockdown/Crackdown

At the beginning of June, [the Congress](#) approved the bill to extend the special powers of President Rodrigo Duterte originally to last until the end of June for another three months. Although the country has lifted its measures of enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) in most parts, new modified ECQ or general quarantine measures are still enforced with [heavy police and military force](#), causing rights violations on the ground and furthering Duterte's fights against his political opponents. Many Filipinos remain with no access to food or water. [The Social Weather Station](#) reported more than 17 million Filipinos experiencing hunger during the past three months. Many Filipinos remained [displaced](#) outside their communities because of travel restrictions. [United](#)

[Nations experts](#) have condemned the Philippines for violating basic human rights during this health crisis, exposing people to police and military violence, disregarding the most vulnerable groups and increasing the systematic injustice in the country.

Further information:

[Asia Times, June 9, 2020 \(Why Duterte wants to extend his Covid-19 emergency\)](#)

[Ramento Projects for Rights Defenders, June 3, 2020 \(Lockdown Crackdown: 8 viral human rights issues revisited\)](#)

The problem of slow and insufficient aid distribution

[The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility](#) stated that through the enhanced community quarantine, many Filipinos have been pushed even deeper into poverty. The implemented aid by the government has been slow and poorly planned and may not even reach those who need it the most. So far, only [1.3 million](#) low-income families have received the 4P aid package, with 5 million more remaining on the waitlist. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) has now welcomed the intention of lawmakers to [investigate](#) the massive delays in the implementation of the program. Originally, the DSWD issued the plan to give aid to 18 million poor and vulnerable families in two waves until the beginning of June, but 78 local governments have not yet finished their distribution from the first wave in April.

Philippine prisons as a Covid-19 hotspot

Filipino prisons continue to be one of the country's major hotspots for Covid-19 infections. As of mid-June, [745 prisoners](#) and 300 prison personnel were tested positive for the Coronavirus. Human rights groups have cried out to release prisoners with minor offenses to decongest the prisons and protect one of the most vulnerable groups to infection in the Philippines. So far, only about [120 inmates](#) were granted parole, with 400 more prisoners awaiting clearance from the National Bureau of Investigation. The rights group [Kapatid](#) already in early April with the support of many other rights groups, filed a petition in front of the Supreme Court to call for the release of sick and elderly prisoners. So far, many opponents of Duterte charged with minor or fabricated charges remain behind bars.

Schools and universities to be closed until vaccine is found

The Philippine government has [announced](#) that schools and universities are only to reopen when a vaccine for COVID-19 has been found, leaving 27 million children and 3 million university students forced to do online learning for the maybe as long as the next 18 to 24 months. This poses a huge challenge for many Filipino households that have no access to internet or a computer, and teachers fear that they will not be ready to introduce remote learning when the school year begins again in August.

[Student groups](#) have warned that the country will see a historic high in school dropouts in the upcoming school year. The negative consequences would include a widening gap between poor and wealthier families, as well as the erosion of future earning potential.

Further information:

[Rappler, June 18, 2020 \(Analysis: Balancing education risks during this pandemic\)](#)

The NPA and the Philippine Military

16 NPA rebels killed: Rebel numbers decline but the fight against communism remains strong

16 NPA rebels were killed in two different incidents in May and June 2020. On May 22, [11 communist rebels](#) were killed in a series of encounters in Andap Valley, a rebel stronghold in Surigao del Sur, the military said. They claimed the act as a "major victory" for the Philippine military. Since the martial law years, the area has been the site of several clashes between government forces and the NPA that have caused evacuations and human rights abuses blamed on security forces. About a month later, on June 18, another [five suspected NPA](#)

[rebels](#) were killed in a clash with the military and police in Barangay Luyang, Mabinay town, Negros Oriental. Among those killed in the 30-minute clash was the suspect in the murder of four policemen in Barangay Mabato, Ayungon town on July 18, 2019. Although the numbers of armed NPA rebels have sharply decreased in the last years, the military continues to fight the communism in the country with excessive force.

Further Information:

[Rappler, June 9, 2019 \(Opinion: The Philippine military and its hypocrisy\)](#)

Killings, abductions and harassment continue amid pandemic

The killings, abductions and harassment of Duterte's opponents continue amid the pandemic. After occupying a community in Surigao, on May 21, the [Lumad](#) Eric Enriquez was arrested for alleged ties to the New People's Army. On May 28, the urban poor leader [Carlito Badion](#) was found dead along a highway in Ormoc City, Leyte. He was engaged in various groups resisting the threats of demolitions of urban poor communities. Soon after Badion's death, [members of urban poor groups](#) in Rizal province were summoned by the military for being members of the Communist party. On June 2, Sarangani barangay captain [Diony Seromines](#) was killed after he allegedly refused to sign a paper as a witness in a drug buy-bust operation. On June 13, a farmers group community organizer in Cebu was abducted by armed intruders and has since remained unseen. [Elena Tijamo](#) was part of the group Fardec, a humanitarian and religious organization that was included in a recent red-tagging spree of the Philippine military. Rights groups have cried out that during these police and military raids quarantine rules were breached and that the personnel did not wear face masks and did not practice physical distancing. They highlighted that even during the health crisis, when the governments resources are desperately needed elsewhere, there is no letup in inhumane killings and police violence.

Senator Leila de Lima seeks bail

After 3 years in jail, opposition Senator Leila de Lima filed for [bail](#) on June 15, for one of the 3 drug charges against her, saying the government has not produced enough evidence against her. In a motion, De Lima sought for bail before the Muntinlupa Regional Trial Court Branch 205 over her alleged violation of Republic Act 9165 or the Dangerous Drugs Act Section 26 on conspiracy, which she said was based on hearsay. The offense is non-bailable, but De Lima applied for bail "because the [evidence](#) (against her) is insufficient" in this case, said her counsel Boni Tacardon. Apart from the conspiracy case, however, De Lima is also facing two drug trade cases. Both are non-bailable. "We recognize the fact that there are two other cases which are non-bailable, but despite the same we are filing this petition for bail if only to send a signal," Tacardon said. Her bail would also uphold her "constitutional presumption of innocence, recognizing her right to due process and guarantee her appearance in court for the remainder of the trial." Her temporary liberty would also let her serve her term as a senator, she said, which was just recently compromised by her [incommunicado detention](#) during the lockdown in Philippine prisons in April and May 2020.

[Newsletter-Archive](#)

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The Aktionsbündnis Menschenrechte - Philippinen (AMP) advocates the sustainable improvement of the human rights situation in the Philippines.

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