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Philippines: Candidates need to divulge their positions on human rights

The worst pre-election violence in Philippine history – the Maguindanao massacre – has focused global attention on the human rights situation in the country. Now more than ever, candidates in the 10 May presidential elections need to clarify how they will address key human rights issues facing the country.

Today as the presidential campaign period officially begins, Amnesty International calls on all of the presidential candidates to make clear, public commitments on the actions they will take in the first 100 days of office to address serious human rights violations. In a public letter to the candidates, Amnesty International called on them to affirm their commitment to:

1) Revoke Executive Order 546, and ensure full accountability over all state-sponsored militias and paramilitary groups.

Despite the mass killing of 63 civilians on 23 November in Maguindanao, members of state-armed local groups and private armies are still free to operate in other parts of the country. The Philippine government's continued failure to establish accountability for members of these armed groups undermines the rule of law and denies human rights protection for civilians. Within 100 days, the new Philippine president should revoke Executive Order 546, which allows for militia and paramilitary groups to provide active support in counterinsurgency operations. In practice, these groups have been ill-trained, unaccountable, poorly integrated into the military chain of command, and responsible for serious human rights violations. In some provinces, Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) effectively function as private armies for local politicians, heightening the risk of pre-election violence.

2) Establish a presidential commission aimed at preventing and prosecuting enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions.

In the last decade, at least 200 Filipinos have been subjected to enforced disappearance, and as many as 1,100 have been executed in political killings. The incoming president needs to establish an impartial and independent commission to review these cases, with the aim of enabling timely and effective investigations and, where warranted, prosecutions.

The new president should initiate legislation that specifically criminalizes enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions. He or she should sign the UN Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.

3) Order the administration to fully implement the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in order to ensure the safety and well-being of the displaced.

Despite the ceasefire in Mindanao, more than 125,000 people remain displaced by the 2008 armed conflict alone. To address this grave humanitarian situation, the incoming president should publicly instruct the administration to ensure that policies comply with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

Under the Guiding Principles, the government must ensure that the displaced are provided with adequate food, water, shelter, and clothing, as well as essential healthcare and sanitation. It must also

guarantee unimpeded humanitarian access to areas under its control. In addition, the government must implement a sustainable plan of action so that the displaced can return to their villages, safely and voluntarily.

As commander-in-chief, the new president will be directly responsible for ensuring that the armed forces comply with international humanitarian law. As a core principle, this law explicitly prohibits direct or indiscriminate attacks against civilians, and this includes displaced persons and all other non-combatants.

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