

Hon. Mélanie Joly
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6
SENT VIA EMAIL

October 1, 2024

RE: Please support the Peace Process in the Philippines

Dear Minister Joly

We are writing on behalf of The United Church of Canada, The Anglican Church of Canada, KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, The Evangelical Church in Canada, Development and Peace, The Presbyterian Church in Canada and The Philippine Independent Church to call on The Government of Canada to support the peace negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

We believe there is a critical opportunity this fall for Canada to influence the resumption of the peace talks and to demonstrate its commitment to international human rights, peacebuilding and women's participation in peace processes. It is also vital that Canada ensure it is not complicit in human rights violations and extra-judicial killings in the Philippines and that human rights are prioritized over economic interests.

There are three concrete steps we would like Canada to deliver on by November 2024ⁱ

1. To publicly support the resumption of the peace talks and call for the repeal of the Philippine government's counter-insurgency policies and strategiesⁱⁱ
2. To initiate diplomatic efforts to broker dialogue towards the resumption of the peace talks and
3. To take the following steps to ensure Canada is prioritizing human rights
 - a. Perform an audit of Canada's provision of financial, programmatic, and technical support to the Government of the Philippines
 - b. Halt the negotiations of the Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA) and
 - c. Suspend Canada's Memorandum of Understanding on Enhanced Defence Cooperationⁱⁱⁱ

Our call for a peaceful solution to the conflict is supported by the many churches and communities of faith across Canada that have longstanding partnerships with civil society organizations, human rights defenders and churches in the Philippines. On September 1, many churches and networks in Canada participated in the International Interfaith Day of Prayer for Just Peace in the Philippines to show public support for the resumption of the peace negotiations and amplify the voices of partners.

As faith communities, we firmly believe in justice and political negotiations as the way to achieve long-term peace. The people of the Philippines have experienced dictatorships, militarization and counter-insurgency attacks on human rights defenders for more than 50 years. After a 21-year dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos, there was hope for peace with the transition to democratic governance in 1986 and the initiation of peace talks with the signing of the Hague Joint Declaration in 1992. The declaration outlined the GRP and NDFP's agreement on a substantive agenda including human rights,

international humanitarian law and social, economic, political and constitutional reforms to resolve the deep-rooted socio-economic and political causes of the conflict.

Despite several suspensions of the Peace Talks, significant progress was being made until then-President Rodrigo Duterte terminated the peace talks in November 2017. He voided all agreements achieved between the two parties during those negotiations and subsequently launched a counter-insurgency offensive that involved extra-judicial killings, “red-tagging” of civil society and humanitarian groups, and attacks on human rights defenders.^{iv} United Nations experts and international human rights organizations point to the counter-insurgency campaign as the cause for the unprecedented escalation of human rights violations against civilians under Duterte. His presidency was characterized by Human Rights Watch as “the worst human rights crisis since the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos.”^v

Today, the Philippines under President Marcos Jr. (son of the former dictator) and Vice-President Sara Duterte (daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte) remains plagued by serious human rights violations, militarization, red-tagging, extra-judicial killings and attacks on human rights defenders and civil society. Duterte’s counter-insurgency policies and strategies have been kept in place by President Marcos Jr. **Our churches work with partners in the region who are the victims of red-tagging, counter-insurgency, being labelled as terrorists. These are human rights defenders and church leaders, not terrorists!**

It is in this context that we point to Canada’s responsibility to stand up for human rights. Canada’s current policy on the Philippines, including our ongoing trade and military relationship, means we could directly or indirectly be contributing to abuses. An immediate audit of Canada’s provision of financial, programmatic, and technical support to the Government of the Philippines is essential. This audit should be completed and publicly reported to Parliament before any new agreements are contemplated, including visiting forces agreements that could place Canadian boots on the ground in the Philippines.

Recent developments in the Philippines present an opportunity for Canada this fall to support a path towards a just peace. On November 23, 2023 the GRP and the NDFP released a Joint Statement indicating a possible resumption of peace negotiations. This month, both parties re-affirmed their commitment to the resumption of the peace talks and the Presidential Peace Adviser acknowledged the need to remove the conditions hindering the forging of a final peace agreement with the NDFP. Canada's public support and encouragement could be key.

President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. has been invited to visit Canada this fall. We have serious concerns about this invitation – given the serious human rights violations linked to the Philippine government are inconsistent with Canada’s commitments to human rights, democracy and good governance. Should such a visit occur, we urge Prime Minister Trudeau to use the opportunity to press strongly for the resumption of the peace talks and to clearly convey to President Marcos Jr. that the measures the Philippine government is taking to respect human rights and to bring about a resumption of the peace talks will be examined when Canada considers initiatives to deepen the relationship between the two countries.

We know that Canadians across the country, and the Government of Canada, care about human rights in the Philippines. We look forward to an opportunity to meet with you in the coming weeks to discuss

how we can support the Government of Canada in implementing these necessary steps to prioritize human rights.

Sincerely,



Archbishop Anne Germond
Acting Primate Archbishop, Anglican Church of Canada



Rev. Susan C. Johnson, National Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada



The Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne, Moderator
The United Church of Canada / L'Église Unie du Canada



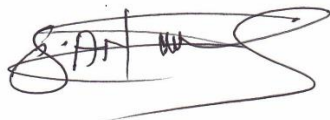
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The Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls
Moderator of the 2024 General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada



Very Rev. Artemio S. Calaycay
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Cc:

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ⁱ Sources indicate that President Marcos of the Philippines will be visiting Canada in the fall of 2024, likely in November.

ⁱⁱ This must include the dissolution of the National Taskforce to End Local Communist Activities (NTF-ELCAC),

ⁱⁱⁱ See attached, Sept 2023 ICHRP Brief *Human Rights and Canada's Enhanced Defence Cooperation with the Philippines*

^{iv} The unprecedented scale of attacks on human rights defenders and civilians were particularly attributed to the National Taskforce to End Local Communist Activities (NTF-ELCAC), created by then President Duterte, that weaponized all government structures to wage a counter-insurgency campaign and institutionalized the policy of “red-tagging” to attack human rights defenders and civilians deemed by the government as terrorists and enemies of the state.

^v <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/philippines>