

Press release of UN special rapporteurs Philip Alston and Philip La Rue on the Ampatuan massacre in Maguindanao.

Maguindanao massacre must be the start of a major reform process

Press Release

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UN Experts: Maguindanao massacre must be the start of a major reform process

GENEVA -- The brutal killing of 57 people in Maguindanao, including some 30 journalists, should be seen as a watershed moment for the Philippines, according to two United Nations human rights experts. Philip Alston, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, and Frank La Rue, Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, said that “the pre-meditated killing of political opponents, combined with a massive assault on the media, must be tackled at various levels that go well beyond standard murder investigations.”

In a statement, the two UN experts indicated that the initial responses of the Government had been encouraging. “The first step”, they noted, “is to ensure that the police investigation is comprehensive and independent, and employs the highest professional standards. It must also be followed by effective prosecutions of all those responsible for the killings.” They added, however, that the massacre also demanded a more extensive reflection on the elite family-dominated manipulation of the political processes and the need to eliminate such practices in order to assure the future of democracy in the Philippines.

“This will require a thorough-going investigation of the broader context to be undertaken by a credible and independent body, appointed with full legal powers to carry out an effective inquiry and make recommendations.” The UN experts expressed their particular dismay at the wholesale killings of journalists and emphasized that any broader inquiry into the political system would need to focus on the ways and means of enhancing protection for journalists in the future.

A third, but even more urgent step is also required according to the UN experts. “Elections in the Philippines have traditionally become occasions for widespread extrajudicial executions of political opponents. There is every indication that the run-up to the May elections will sound the death knell for many political activists.” Alston and La Rue added that “the Government should acknowledge this likelihood and immediately establish a high-level task force, with broad political support, to identify the measures that should be taken to prevent killings that occur in the lead-up to the elections”.

“The Maguindanao killings are a tragedy of the first order”, said the experts. But the challenge now is to go beyond a criminal law response and to take measures designed to protect the media in particular, and freedom of expression in general, and to prevent election-related violence in the months ahead. “The international community will be monitoring the Government’s response very carefully”, they added.

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Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/executions/index.htm>.

Learn more about the mandate and activities of the Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, please visit:
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/opinion/index.htm>.

The Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions carried out an official mission to the Philippines in February 2007. Consult his 2007 report on the mission and his 2009 follow-up report at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/executions/visits.htm>.

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