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Philippines: Five human rights defenders killed and four arrested in coordinated raids by police and military

On 7 March 2021, during coordinated operations led by the police and military in the Batangas, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal provinces surrounding Metro Manila, five human rights defenders were among those killed and four human rights defenders were arrested. Human rights defenders **Emanuel Asucion, Melvin Dasigao, Mark Lee Coros Bacasno, Chai Lemita-Evangelista** and **Ariel Evangelista** were among those killed, whilst human rights defenders **Nimfa Lanzanas, Esteban Mendoza, Eugene Eugenio** and **Elizabeth Camoral** were arrested during the raids. They are currently being held at the Camp Vicente Lim in Laguna, and the Antipolo station.

[Emanuel “Manny” Asucion](#) was a labour rights defender and the coordinator of the Cavite chapter of the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, an umbrella organisation of workers’ unions, peasant associations, youth, women, indigenous peoples, committed to advocating for social rights, and the organising of campaigns protesting the extra-judicial killings of human rights defenders and the militarization of communities. [Melvin Dasigao](#) and [Mark Lee Coros Bacasno](#) were human rights defenders, youth organisers, and members of Sikkad Montalban, a group working for the rights of the urban poor. [Ana Marie “Chai” Lemita-Evangelista](#) and [Ariel Evangelista](#) were human rights defenders and leaders of the progressive group for fisherfolk, Ugnayan ng Mamamayan Laban sa Pagwawasak ng Kalikasan. Both defenders have been strong advocates of the protection of rights of members of their communities.

[Nimfa Lanzanas](#) is a woman human rights defender, member of Friends of Political Prisoners and works as a paralegal for Karapatan, an alliance of individuals, groups and organisations, formed in 1995 for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Philippines. [Esteban Mendoza](#) is a labour rights defender and the Vice-President of the Kilusang Mayo Uno trade union. [Elizabeth Camoral](#) is a woman human rights defender and the spokesperson of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan in Laguna. [Eugene Eugenio](#) is a labour rights defender and a member of the Rizal chapter of the Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees.

On 7 March 2021, in the early hours of the morning, police and military officers conducted separate raids on the homes of human rights defenders and others as part of a coordinated operation across the provinces of Batangas, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal. The operation was conducted against alleged members of “Communist Terrorist Groups”. Search and arrest warrants had been issued prior to the raids taking place, however it is not known whether the warrants were presented by the officials during the raids. Emmanuel Asucion was first arrested by police in front of his wife at the office of the Workers’ Assistance Center in Dasmariñas, Cavite, before police officers shot at him six times, killing the human rights defender. Before the officers shot and killed Emmanuel Asucion he had offered to fully cooperate with the police if a search warrant was provided. At roughly the same time, police raided the home of human rights defenders Ana Marie “Chai” Lemita-Evangelista and Ariel Evangelista, and shot and killed both defenders in front of their 10 year-old son. Melvin Dasigao and Mark Lee Coros Bacasno were shot and killed by police during a raid of their homes in Montalban, Rizal.

On the same day and time, human rights defender Nimfa Lanzanas was arrested by officers who raided her home in Calamba, Laguna. Human rights defenders Esteban Mendoza and Elizabeth Camoral were arrested by police and military officers of their homes during separate raids in Cabuyao, Laguna. Eugene Eugenio was arrested by police during the raid of his home in Antipolo City. The police and military officers arrested the human rights defenders on the allegation that they were in possession of illegal firearms and ammunition. The accusations against the human rights

defenders are completely fabricated and can be viewed as part of the military's ongoing attempts to intimidate and vilify human rights defenders by levying false and baseless accusations against them in retaliation for their human rights work. All four human rights defenders have had access to their lawyers in Camp Vicente Lim in Laguna, and the Antipolo station, since being detained. No charges have yet been brought against the human rights defenders.

Two days prior to the raids and killings, on 5 March 2021, President Rodrigo Duterte delivered a speech in which he [ordered](#) the Philippine National Police and the Army to "ignore human rights" and "kill" and "finish off" communist rebels in armed encounters. The "red-tagging"¹ of human rights defenders by the government and high-ranking officials has led to an increase in the number of killings of human rights defenders in the country. While the government has justified its use of force in the name of the 'war on drugs' and 'counter-insurgency campaigns', this use of excessive force, resulting in brutal killings, is completely unjustifiable and is not in compliance with international human rights standards. In June 2020, a UN [report](#) documented the rise in the number of killings in the country which have occurred with relative impunity, and the deteriorating state of due process in official operations conducted by the police and military.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the continuing violence and repression against human rights defenders in the Philippines and strongly condemns the killings of human rights defenders Emanuel Asucion, Melvin Dasigao, Mark Lee Coros Bacasno, Chai Lemita-Evangelista and woman human rights defender Ariel Evangelista, and expresses grave concern regarding the arrests of human rights defenders Esteban Mendoza and Eugene Eugenio, and woman human rights defenders Nimfa Lanzanas and Elizabeth Camoral. Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in the Philippines to cease all harassment, violence and killings of human rights defenders in the country.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in the Philippines to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of human rights defenders Emanuel Asucion, Melvin Dasigao, Mark Lee Coros Bacasno, two indigenous rights defenders, two housing rights defenders, Chai Lemita-Evangelista and woman human rights defender Ariel Evangelista, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Immediately cease the investigation and drop all charges against Nimfa Lanzanas, Esteban Mendoza, Elizabeth Camoral and Eugene Eugenio, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being targeted solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights and journalism;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the human rights defenders, in consultation with them;
4. Take measures to ensure that public officials refrain from making unfounded statements or declarations stigmatising the character and work of human rights defenders;
5. Cease the targeting of human rights defenders in the Philippines and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

¹ "Red-tagging" refers to the broad trend of labelling by the Philippine authorities of human rights defenders, journalists, rural communities and others perceived as threats or enemies of the State, as having links to communist groups.