

The Philippines Australia Solidarity Association (PASA) wishes to make a submission on the ‘People’s Inquiry: Exploring the Case for an Independent and Peaceful Australia, What are the costs and consequences of Australia’s involvement in US-led wars and the US-alliance?’.

PASA is a Melbourne-based solidarity group that promotes peace, justice and human rights, focusing on issues in the Philippines and Australia. Since its formation in 2003, PASA’s main focus has been the issue of human rights in the Philippines, particularly the alarming number of political killings since that time. PASA’s continuing campaign on stop the killings and Australian mining issues in the Philippines have involved raising awareness through forums, film showings and vigils, as well as lobbying Australian politicians and Philippine government officials.

The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) invites individuals and organisations to make submissions in relation to each of the eight broad areas of the Inquiry including: Impact on First Nation’s Peoples; Economic; Social and Community; Environment and Climate Change; Military and Defence; Foreign Policy; Political (including Democratic Rights); and Unions and Workers’ Rights.

In this submission, PASA intends to address the Military and Defence focus area regarding the impact of US-Australia military alliance on peace, democracy and human rights situation in the Philippines, affected by the Australian military aid and its participation in US-led wars in the region.

1. The worsening human rights situation in the Philippines

In his last State of the Nation (SONA) address on 26 July 2021, President Duterte lauded his continuing policy of extra judicial killing of human rights defenders and dissents against his administration. He shamelessly boasted: ‘My orders to you, if you see them [communists] around, kindly shoot them dead, and I will be happy’.

In today’s Philippines, such blatant attacks have become numerous and more vicious since Duterte heightened its crackdown on dissents in the form of ‘red-tagging’ campaign on militant and progressive individuals and groups and their supporters.

The passage of Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 has only intensified this culture of impunity where anyone – from politicians, church leaders and lawyers to human rights and environmental defenders, trade unionists, farmers organisers and indigenous leaders – who opposes Duterte and his regime are labelled ‘terrorists’ and are target of political killings and assassinations.

A latest report from Karapatan, a grassroots human rights organisation in the Philippines, recorded a total of 394 victims of political killings under the Duterte regime from July 2016 to March 2021 (Karapatan 2021, 5).

The Initial Report of the Independent International Commission of Investigation Into Human Rights Violations in the Philippines (INVESTIGATE PH) in March 2021 further highlights that political repression by state forces in the Philippines has intensified and become more brazen since June 2020 (INVESTIGATE PH 2021, 6).

This widespread human rights abuses have been facilitated by the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act in July 2020 as well as the establishment of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), authorised by the Executive Order No. 70 of President Duterte in December 2018.

The so-called ‘weaponisation’ of the legal process, that is the persistent use of search warrants to conduct police and military raids on the homes and offices of progressive leaders and activists followed by summary executions and planting of evidence, has become a clear pattern of state violence and repression that gives a legal justification for human rights abuses in the country.

The rampant political killings have shown how the current regime fails to protect the rights of its citizens to voice out their concerns, which is a blatant disregard of the rule of law and a grave breach of its international human rights obligations.

The government and its security forces are even using the COVID-19 crisis to silence the growing discontent of the people by stifling freedom of speech, of expression and of peaceful assembly.

Moreover, extrajudicial killings of drug suspects, activists and dissidents continue, who openly criticise his deadly war on drugs policy and other human rights abuses by the government.

The human rights crisis in the Philippines is deeply imbedded in the long-standing social, economic and political conflicts in Philippine society that dated back from the US colonial rule in the early twentieth century up to the present-day’s domination and oppression of the powerful elite in the country against ordinary people.

It is clear that institutionalised state violence is not the answer to these conflicts, but through a genuine and sincere effort by the Philippine government to address the root causes of the country’s systematic poverty and inequality, landlessness and joblessness, injustice and oppression through continuous dialogue and peace process.

2. Australian geopolitical and economic interests in the Philippines

PASA submits that the worsening human rights situation in the Philippines is well connected to the Australian geopolitical and economic interest in the region. Australia’s military aid provides an impetus for the protection and security of its business interest in the region.

This can be seen in two distinct, but related, military/development assistance in the country: first is Australia’s military aid to the Philippines; and second is Australia’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) under the guise of peace and development program.

2.1 Australia’s military aid to the Philippines

On 1 December 2019, Australian Minister for Defence Linda Reynolds and Philippine Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana have agreed for Australia’s continuing military support to the Philippines under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Program.

The new program was an offshoot of Operation AUGURY-Philippines that resulted from the siege of Marawi City by ISIS-affiliated militants in October 2017. Operation AUGURY-Philippines has provided ‘counter-terrorism capacity training to over 10,000 members of the Armed Forces of Philippines’ between 2017 and 2019 (Department of Defence 2019).

The program not only includes regular military exercises, but also provides ‘capacity-building in areas ranging from maritime security to counterterrorism as well as assistance with respect to the peace process in the southern Philippines’ (Parameswaran 2017a).

During the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, the Philippines approved a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with Australia in November 2015. Australia and the US are the only two countries that have the privilege of a VFA with the Philippines, although the United States has a bigger number of visiting soldiers under the so-called Balikatan (‘shoulder to shoulder’) exercises, when the Philippines was declared as the ‘second front’ of the US led ‘war on terror’ in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Marawi siege has reinforced this ‘war on terror’ rhetoric that provided Australia a more clout to establish its military presence and protect its geopolitical and economic interests in the region. For example, Australia, along with Singapore and the US, has offered various forms of military and intelligence support including AP-3C Orion military planes to help with surveillance in Marawi (Parameswaran 2017b).

Recently, in October 2020, during the pandemic, Australia has announced additional Australian defence support for the Philippines to expand the Philippine military’s COVID-19 response. It has also donated some PHP 2.7 million worth of Information Technology and multimedia equipment including high-tech computers, tablets, storage devices, smart TVs, cameras and audio recording components that will assist the Philippine military’s ‘capability of preventing and countering violent extremism in the country’ (Recuenco 2021).

It further highlights the two countries’ commitment to deepen their cooperation through the conduct of COVID-safe military exercises as well as defence industry cooperation. In particular, Australia ‘will provide up to AUD2 million (PHP 70 million) in medical and personal protective equipment to support infectious disease wards at the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ five main medical centres across the country’ (Australian Embassy 2020).

The funds are also part of the AUD1 million (PHP 35 million) support that Australia provided through its Enhanced Defence Cooperation Program for the expansion of the infectious disease ward of the Victoriano Luna Medical Center in Manila in early 2020.

2.2 The military-civilian link and the whole of government approach

The provision of military aid to the Philippines is only one component of Australia’s overall national security and strategic policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Another component of Australia’s foreign affairs and defence policy, that has been frequently overlooked, is the so-called ‘military-civilian’ link—a policy disguised as a form of development aid and ‘humanitarian’ assistance for peace, progress and stability in the country.

The neoliberal framework of both countries in this area is quite revealing. Development aid has become an effective tool used by donor countries like Australia to open up the recipient country’s market economy, forcing the country to implement neoliberal policies that promote

free trade, labour flexibilization, public-private partnership (PPP) programs and openness to foreign investments such as Australia's huge mining interests in the Philippines.

It has been revealed that recipient governments are often more than willing to accommodate such conditionalities, not necessarily because aid brings 'peace and development' per se, but because aid helps prop-up the government's own political and economic power that breeds corruption, militarisation and violence against poor local communities (Council for People's Development and Governance 2019, 48-49).

For instance, human rights violations against indigenous people's rights to ancestral lands are widespread in areas such as in the Cordillera region in Northern Philippines and in Mindanao in Southern Philippines, where the government promotes large-scale foreign-funded mining activities by huge Australian mining companies including OceanaGold, Glencore-Xstrata and BHP Billiton, amongst others.

Mindanao is a unique place in the overall peace and security agenda of the Philippine government and its donors. Major donors with economic interests in Mindanao, like the United States and Australia, for instance, put a lot of effort in directing their military-civilian aid in Mindanao because of its vast underexploited natural resources and huge economic potential for big investments and profit (Padilla 2006, 134).

Moreover, the overall scheme of 'military-civilian' link is also related to what is known in the governmental policy language as the 'whole of government' approach. The whole of government approach is an integrated approach where government uses formal and informal networks across different agencies to coordinate implementation of range of interventions in achieving a desired outcome (OECD 2004, 14).

Thus, the whole of government framework requires the blending of 'humanitarian' intervention and active peace keeping operations in disaster areas like flooding, bush fires and lockdowns in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Australian ODA context, the whole of government approach consists of harnessing specific experience, skills and knowledge across a range of Australian Government agencies that include foreign affairs, aid agencies and law enforcement.

The role of law enforcement is very precise in this area. As the Department of Foreign Affairs website states: 'The Australian Federal Police, which undertake activities in the region aimed at establishing, developing and monitoring peace, stability and security' (Department of Foreign Affairs 2016).

The whole of government approach has clearly blurred the distinction between military and civilian components of aid programs. This framework not only distort the meaning of peace and development in its true sense, but it also heightens the human rights abuses of ordinary people in the Philippines in pursuit of a narrow economic self-interest of governments and its big business allies.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

The worsening human rights situation in the Philippines is at an all-time high since Duterte resumed office in July 2016. It is clear in this submission that there is a strong connection

between the worsening human rights abuses and the continuing Australian military aid and development assistance in the country.

One can infer that Australia's provision of military and civilian aid in the Philippines supports the all-out-war agenda of the Duterte regime against activists, human rights defenders, drug users and ordinary citizens.

Australian funds and resources are likely to be used within the 'security framework' agenda of the Philippine government and its security forces, which subsumed peace and development program under a military-designed counterinsurgency and anti-terror measures of the government against the so-called 'enemies of the state'.

Therefore, PASA recommends the following calls and actions:

1. Publicly condemn the state sponsored terror and human rights violations of the Duterte regime.
2. End all support and cooperation with the Philippine military and the police, including the withdrawal of financial and technical assistance for anti-terrorism and training provided by the Australian government directly to the Philippine government or through other entities such as the ASEAN and Interpol.
3. Australia withdraws from US-Australia military alliance that drags Australia in the US' endless wars of aggression and intervention on sovereign countries in the Asia-Pacific region including the Philippines.
4. Establish an Australian independent monitoring body, through parliamentary system or otherwise, to oversee how Australian aid programs are being used in the recipient country, which should strictly comply with international humanitarian and human rights law standard.
5. Support a resolution for an international and independent investigation of the human rights abuses in the Philippines through the United Nations (UN) system to urge the UN to make use of international mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable for human rights violations and to seek justice to victims.

References

Australian Embassy (2020) 'Additional Australian Defence Support for the Philippines to expand AFP's COVID-19 response', 22 October 2020:
<https://philippines.embassy.gov.au/mnla/medrel20201022.html>

Council for People's Development and Governance (2019) 'Land Grabs and State Forces: Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar' in *Assessing Aid and Militarism in Asia*, Quezon City: The Reality of Aid – Asia Pacific, pp. 46-53: <https://realityofaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Assessing-Aid-and-Militarism-in-Asia.pdf>

Department of Defence (2019) 'Operation Augury-Philippines transitions to Enhanced Defence Cooperation Program', 17 November 2019:
<https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/media-releases/operation-augury-philippines-transitions-enhanced-defence>

Department of Foreign Affairs (2016) 'Whole of Government', 2 May 2016:
<https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/who-we-work-with/whole-of-government/Pages/whole-of-government>

INVESTIGATE PH (2021) Initial Report of the Independent International Commission of Investigation Into Human Rights Violations in the Philippines, 15 March 2021:
<https://www.investigate.ph/media/first-report>

Karapatan (2021) Karapatan Monitor, January-April 2021:
<https://www.karapatan.org/taxonomy/term/35>

OECD (2004) Whole of Government Approach to Fragile States, Paris: OECD Publishing:
<https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/37826256.pdf>

Padilla, Arnold (2006) 'Aid and Conflict: The Philippine Case' in Conflict, Security and Development, Quezon City: The Reality of Aid, Asia Pacific Edition, pp. 131-145:
<https://realityofaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/RoA-Report-2006-Part-III.pdf>

Parameswaran, Prashanth (2017a) 'New Australia Military Terror Aid for the Philippines?', The Diplomat, 31 August 2017: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/new-australia-military-terror-aid-for-the-philippines/>

Parameswaran, Prashanth (2017b) 'What Will Australia's New Military Terror Aid to the Philippines Look Like?', The Diplomat, 12 September 2017:
<https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/what-will-australias-new-military-terror-aid-to-the-philippines-look-like/>

Recuenco, Aaron (2021) 'Australian gov't donates P2.7M worth of IT, multi-media equipment to PH military', Manila Bulletin, 24 June 2021:
<https://mb.com.ph/2021/06/24/australian-govt-donates-p2-7m-worth-of-it-multi-media-equipment-to-ph-military/>