

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST INT THE PHILIPPINES

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL PASTORAL LETTER

Put on the armor of faith, resist evil!

...Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6: 10-13 NRSV)

It has been repeatedly mentioned in the various Church's Pastoral and Social-Ethical Statements the extent to which a significant number of our Church leaders and members have been persecuted by the State forces. The chilling effect could not be underestimated caused by red-tagging, trumped up charges, issuance of search and arrest warrants and other forms of threats. The simplest expression of Christian ministry like giving support to the poor, deprived and oppressed are taken against us-- faithful believers of Jesus Christ. Our deepest concern for the many who are landless, homeless, and unemployed are used by government's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) to isolate the Church from the people it is committed to serve.

Undeniably, the worsening of political, economic and social situation in society and the inability of the government to address the widening chasm between wealth and economic depravity of the majority of the Filipino people has produced varying results, from beggary on the streets, forced labor migration both to urban areas and abroad, sex trafficking, induced participation in illegal drugs trade, and to revolutionary struggle. Our ministries and mission as a Church has been touching and transforming lives and communities, but we have been subjected to severe persecution by the State forces that are happy to shame the identity of our leaders and sow intrigues among the members in the local churches. Aside from these, actual harassments and persecution have been manifested in the cases compiled by the Justice Peace and Human Rights program.

Since 2016, the cases of human rights violations and forms of harassments reached to a total of 241 persons, of which 199 are from the laity and 42 are Church Workers. There

are 194 victims of red tagging or similar harassments including image shaming, intimidations, death threats, dissemination of black propaganda materials, social media attacks, posters, pictures, tarpaulins, and similar cases. Fourteen (14) are illegally detained and imprisoned due to illegal search warrants, illegal arrest, trumped-up cases, planting of evidences, and other forms of illegal apprehension, while four (4) were extra judicially killed. Thirty (30) were acquitted from trumped-charges, released from illegal imprisonment because of the use of legal remedies and other strategies.

The most recent victims are our church members in the local churches in Biliran Province, part of North Eastern Leyte-Biliran Conference (NELBICON), East Visayas Jurisdiction. The incident took place on July 9, 2021 and perpetrated by the elements of the 802nd IB of the Philippine Army (PA) who posted unscrupulous allegation on their Facebook account linking among others, UCCP as “a Church affiliated with the CPP-NPA- NDF in Biliran province”.

Following this, is the blatant harassment of Bishop Jerome Baris, where tarpaulins were posted on trunks of trees along the highway at Lawaan, E. Samar across the UCCP Lawaan local church last September 28, 2021, and on fences in the town plaza of General Mac Arthur, Eastern Samar, which was first seen by some local church members on October 2, 2021; smearing on his character with blatant lies, associating him with the CPP-NPA-NDF, further maligning the Church and its ministries. These deeply concerns us that despite the dire circumstances the Filipino have been enduring in this time of pandemic the Duterte government has allowed this despicable and condemnable schemes to happen.

Moreover, the Southeast Mindanao Jurisdictional Area Bishop Hamuel Tequis was likewise blatantly harassed by the same red tagging schemes displayed in some public areas in Davao City, and fake news that was posted on the social media. His courageous prophetic witness and faithful commitment in delivering social services to the indigenous people, sheltering them in the UCCP Haran, were met by State forces with contemptuous intrusions into the sanctuary by vigilante groups and the filing of trumped-up criminal charges in courts have marred the prelate’s name and the dignity of the Church’s office.

We should not forget that on February 1990, the Council of Bishops issued a statement which “declares as sanctuaries and zones of peace all its church buildings, parsonages and lands, hospitals and schools, and other church-owned institutions and their premises. As sanctuaries, these places and premises are open to all people, regardless of color and creed, sex and status, and of political and religious affiliation, at all times, in all circumstances of need. We welcome those needing sanctuary to use these places for protection, study, reflection, retreat, prayers and meditation, or simply for rest and quiet.”

In the light of all these circumstances, and as officers and members of the National

Council of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, on its 26th meeting enjoin all our Church constituencies at the Local Churches and Conferences to observe, reflect and take actions on the following:

- Hold fast to our faith in the God of justice and peace, who will sustain us in our prophetic witness in the life of society and the world through regular prayer time for justice and peace;
- Strengthen our ranks by reviewing or studying Biblico-theological foundations of human life with dignity and constitutional and legal basis of human rights;
- Express our genuine concern for the victims of human rights violations in our Church and those in the larger society and extend various kinds of support, whether psycho-social, spiritual, material, legal or financial.
- Collectively resist the attacks by thwarting the evil schemes of State forces especially the NTF-ELCAC, the police and military operatives by disclosing information of possible intrusions into the Church communities, private homes of our members and Pastor's residences;
- Resist the spreading of fake news and black propaganda spread by the NTF-ELCAC through unknown Facebook pages and social media posts, or any related uncredible sources outside the church. It is highly advised that Church members should study and discuss with their Church's Pastor or Study group the pastoral letters and church statements regarding stories of the victims of human rights violations;
- Local Churches and Conferences are advised to establish their Justice Peace and Human Rights Committee and Quick Reaction Team for organized and systematic approach to programs and responses to people and communities under threat due to the heightening of political repression and the dire economic situation in the country;
- Keep connected with the JPHR program staff at the National Secretariat and the Office of the General Secretary, including the Jurisdictional Offices;
- Optimize networking with civilian local government units and likeminded NGOs for access to free-legal assistance and other forms of support for victims of human rights violations; and
- Protect yourselves and your families by heightening your awareness of your surroundings especially for suspicious individuals and movements.

Together, let us put on the armor of faith-our prophetic faith and witness, our courage to fight the evil schemes through our wise decisions and strategies for collective action in protecting our lives, our rights and welfare and those of the vulnerable people.

Just as St. Paul admonished, so we say: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. (Eph. 6: 13-15).

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL

11-14 October 2021

Malate, Manila



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Chairperson



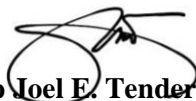
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North Luzon Jurisdictional Area



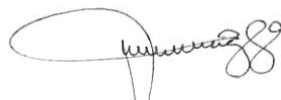
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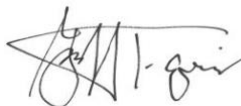
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Bishop Ligaya F. San Francisco
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Bishop Hamuel G. Tequis
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National Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF)

Ms. Gina Providencia
National Christian Young Adults Fellowship

Mrs. Nerissa Dela Cruz
National Church Women’s Association (CWA)

Mr. Jessie Garcia
National United Church Men (UCM)

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