

**PANTAO REPORTS**

# **PITIK-MULAT**

**Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights)  
2023 Human Rights Situationer**



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## **About the Cover**

Pitik-Mulat is a concept that acts as a subtle yet powerful antidote against the pervasive influence of disinformation. Drawing inspiration from the gentle flick that stirs one from slumber, Pitik-Mulat aims to serve as an instrument of awakening—a delicate nudge inviting the Filipino people to rise from the depths of state-induced complacency.

Delivered through channels that impart truth through visuals, narratives, and interactive elements, we hope to gently puncture the seemingly seamless flow of distortion of both history and current reality that shrouds public perception. Pitik-Mulat seeks to instigate a collective cognitive awakening, encouraging individuals to question, reflect, and discern amidst the noise of misleading machineries. Our hope is to spark curiosity, inspire critical thinking, and sow the seeds of awareness.

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# Foreword

As the second year of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration unfolds, hope is dimming for a respite from the human rights crisis brought on by Rodrigo Duterte's government.

Consultations and interviews with community partners, families of victims of human rights violations, representatives of the basic sectors, and human rights defenders offered many variations on the same tune: The situation is dire, and the government is not honoring its human rights obligations to the Filipino people.

Particularly egregious is a socioeconomic agenda lacking urgency and commitment to addressing the most basic of needs of so many of our fellow Filipinos. The high prices of basic goods, rice among them, is a cruel rejoinder to Marcos Jr.'s promise of a **Bagong Lipunan**.

This report summarizes our efforts to highlight on-ground realities and examine how the present government employs anti-human rights policies to inflict harm upon our people. We hope this report serves as a nudge to awaken the Filipino people to the necessity of speaking up for ourselves and each other. The call remains, **All Human Rights for All**.

**Prof. Nymia Pimentel Simbulan, DrPH**  
Executive Director, PhilRights



O TO  
EPNEY  
ASEOUT

FREE ALL  
POLITICAL  
PRISONERS

PASISMO  
BIGUN

IMPORT  
LIBERALIZATION  
IRASUR

OIL DEREGULATION  
LAW, IBASURA!

BIGAS  
HINDI  
BALA!

STOP THE  
ZIONIST  
OCCUPATION  
OF PALESTINE

LUPA SA  
MAGSASAKA  
PAGKAIN PARA  
SALAHATI!

SERBISYO  
SA TAO,  
TG GAWING  
NEGOSYO!

NO TO  
SLAMAT

TUNAY NA  
REPORMA  
SA LUPA  
IPAGLABAN

SAHO  
ITAAS  
RESY  
PABA

ABOLISH  
NTE-ELCAC

# Part 1

## Negotiating survival: The Derogation of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights



Despite touted economic recovery, the nation faces persistent poverty due to high living costs. In Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s first year, crises in food security, oil, transportation, and housing compounded the economic downturn. Neoliberal policies prioritized corporate interests, neglecting human rights and citizens' well-being.



## Labor and Livelihood, a Crisis Amplified

In the face of a looming economic crisis, Filipinos are grappling with the challenge of making ends meet. Reports from PhilRights' community partners revealed that unsafe work practices, inadequate benefits, and discrimination intensified these struggles, reflecting a multifaceted issue of precarious employment and job loss.

The latest Labor Force Survey (LFS) showed the underemployment rate going down to 12.5% and the [unemployment rate going down to 4.6%](#), both at par with pre-pandemic numbers. Despite better employment numbers, [around 44.8% of employed workers are estimated to be involved in the informal economy](#). A significant gap persists between economic capacity and daily financial requirements for many Filipinos, leading to a reliance on the informal economy despite its inherent instability and lack of protection. Informality is often

linked to precarity due to limited legal safeguards and social security for workers. According to IBON Foundation, the recent job creation and employment boom could be linked to the increase of self-employed and informally employed workers that could mostly be low-paying or of poor quality.

IBON estimates show that the average daily nominal wage (Php421) nationwide is just one-third of the family living wage (Php1,187). The scarcity of jobs and inadequate provincial wages drive workers from provincial areas to seek opportunities in cities, highlighting a broader geographic disparity.

Due to the lack of localized industries and uneven development, [residents from resettlements outside key urban areas still have to travel back for work](#):



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“Ang lahat po ng mga trabahador dito, lumuluwas po sa iba’t ibang lugar. Kaya pagka Lunes dito... punong-puno po’yung sakayan diyan dahil may pasok, papasok palayo rito sa lugar namin. Hindi dito.” [All workers here travel to other cities or nearby places. That’s why every Monday... loading areas are filled with people because they’re on their way to work, they’re going to work away from our area. Not here.]  
(Min, Bulacan)





PhilRights' monitoring also revealed that residents who stay are mostly involved in informal work such as peeling garlic, sweeping streets, or selling food in carts outside their houses, but even the garlic they peel or food they sell are still sourced from larger markets such as Divisoria or Baclaran, again highlighting geographical inequalities in terms of access.

The lack of available well-paying work in the Philippines has also propelled Filipinos to continue seeking sustainable and fulfilling employment options outside the country. [The first half of 2023 saw 1,209,335 Overseas Filipino Workers \(OFWs\) deployed](#), with a projected almost two million OFWs deployed by the end of the year. For decades now, the government's thrust has been to encourage the overseas migration of OFWs instead of focusing on creating quality jobs in the domestic market. As per the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), [OFWs remittances soared to US\\$2.78 billion in May 2023](#), marking an increase of US\$80 million compared to the previous year. Given this, it is not unthinkable why an [ad campaign centered on promoting labor exporting](#) was launched by the Presidential Adviser on Creative Communications. As much as it is an attractive escape, OFWs leave the country with great precarity. In Kuwait alone, [24,000 workers faced abuse from their employers in 2022](#). In the last ten years, [27 workers have died due to foul play](#). Without a government that is more resolute in implementing robust

labor protection policies and maintaining a steadfast foreign policy, our workers remain vulnerable and underserved.

Domestically, unsafe practices are still prevalent. [Only 2.2 million Filipinos observe proper guidelines for occupational safety and health practices](#) according to the International Labour Organization, citing the Philippine government's own estimates. [A fifth of Filipinos have experienced physical, psychological and sexual harassment](#) within their workplace. Sixty percent (60%) of these have experienced it happening more than three times. Other than safety, workers deal with discrimination from their employers. PhilRights' community partners have also mentioned that the many employment practices, such as age requirements or prices of uniforms, have discouraged, or even barred them from getting work.

According to a study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, [women still experience overt and covert discriminatory practices in the workplace](#). Although more educated than their counterparts, women still receive less pay and opportunities. Women with lower levels of education are at a worse disadvantage. Adding salt to the wound, they must also grapple with the double burden of facing employment and domestic responsibilities.



## Working Towards Food Insecurity

Widespread economic hardships are forcing households to choose between basic needs, with food security a critical concern. The latest Social Weather Survey by pollster Social Weather Stations (SWS) found that [almost 1 in 10 families faced involuntary hunger](#) at least once during the third quarter of 2023.

The agricultural sector struggles due to insufficient government support, putting local farmers/food producers at the mercy of abusive and unscrupulous traders and middlepersons. Dependence on imports elevates food prices, impeding the development of a self-sustaining agriculture system. Inadequate investment and support lead to a diminishing

workforce, jeopardizing the steady food supply for the growing population.

Implementing tariffs, quotas, and liberalized trade policies has further exacerbated the issues within the agriculture sector. Just recently, the Philippines entered a [five-year trade agreement with Vietnam](#), which serves as the source for almost 90% of the Philippines' rice imports. According to a United States Department of Agriculture report, the Philippines is projected to be [this year's top rice importer, with 3.8 million metric tons of rice, surpassing China's 3.5 million metric tons](#). As a response to soaring prices, the government attempted to put a price cap on rice prices. However,

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“Nawala na po ’yung dagat dahil sa mga itinayo nila.”  
[The sea disappeared because of what they built.]  
(Derrick, Navotas)



this band-aid solution will only [aggravate the situation by adversely affecting rice traders](#). Having already purchased the supply at a high price, small-time traders may resort to the black market, potentially causing a rice shortage and likely resulting in elevated prices in the long run.

Large-scale environmental degradation further compounds the challenges faced by the agriculture sector. As corporate industrialization and urbanization advance, the available space for food production diminishes. In Navotas, reclamation projects have heavily affected the fisherfolk community and the local mussel industry. A study about the environmental impact of

the Navotas reclamation project recognized the possible [disturbance to the area's marine ecosystem](#), including a possible migration of fish and other marine animals.

Food insecurity impacts the economy and jeopardizes a stable food supply. Addressing this necessitates comprehensive policy reforms, increased support for local farmers, and sustainable practices to ensure long-term food security. Despite abundant resources, the nation's farmers and fisherfolks endure poverty and hunger, a bitter irony in a country with fertile agricultural land, bodies of water, and rich ecological biodiversity.



## “Progress” Over Environmental Sustainability

Philippine biodiversity is imperiled by infrastructure projects favoring so-called development over the environment, reflecting neoliberal approaches. This prompts questions about who benefits from progress. Infrastructure expansion encroaches on habitats, causing deforestation and habitat loss. Fueled by neoliberal policies, this degradation adversely affects communities, especially those below the poverty line.

The Bulacan construction for the [New Manila International Airport](#) has already displaced seven sitios in Taliptip, Bulacan. Meanwhile, the upcoming reclamation program in Bacoor, Cavite is slated to [displace a 90-hectare area covered by](#)

[eleven barangays](#). Both projects are directly affecting local fishing communities.

Driven by these projects, environmental degradation worsens problems in food security. Ecosystem disruption, soil degradation, and water pollution undermine sustainable food production, directly threatening agriculture-dependent livelihoods.

Sustainability becomes a vital concern in this scenario. Environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized sectors, while the top 1%, often linked to these projects, remains insulated from consequences.

## Teetering on the Brink of a Housing Crisis

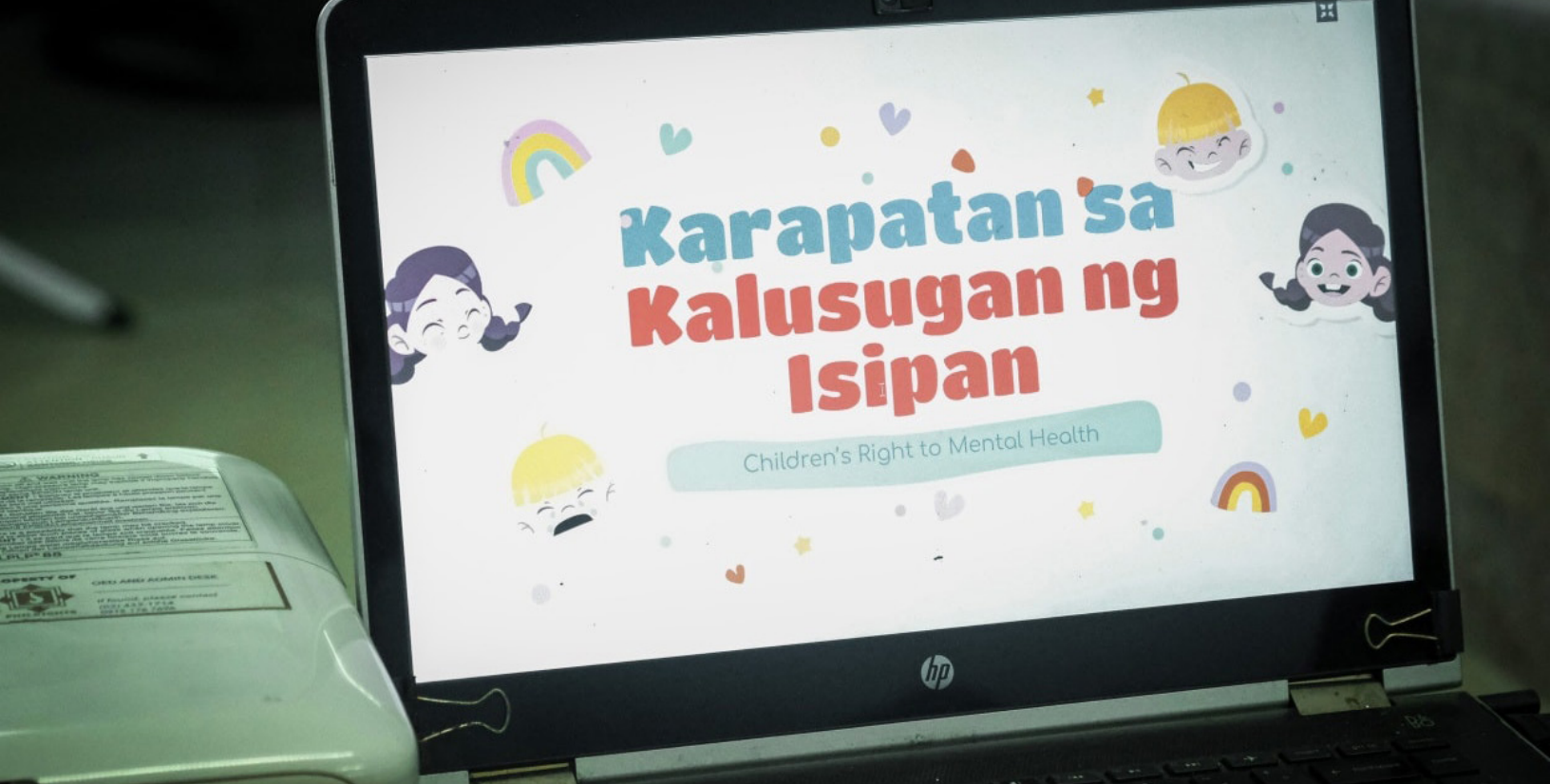
Every Filipino has the right to a safe and decent place to live. However, economic struggles, rising housing costs, and stagnant wages create a situation where getting a secure home is a difficult dream for many. Given this year's meager minimum wage increase and escalating living costs, many Filipinos still grapple with securing decent housing.

According to government data, approximately 12,000 individuals are experiencing homelessness, while 57,000 Filipinos reside in resettlement sites, numbers which are suspiciously low. Over 60% of unhoused Filipinos are concentrated in the National Capital Region (NCR), a figure that may have increased, especially in the wake of the pandemic, primarily due to the surge in housing prices. However, Build Change reports that 70 million Filipinos still live in vulnerable housing. Resettlement areas, deemed a solution, present issues—PhilRights community partners cite challenges in accessing necessities post-relocation, like electricity, stable water, transportation, medical care, and nearby schools.

According to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), housing prices in the National Capital Region rose 7.3% in the first quarter of 2023 compared to the previous year, increasing further to 15.4% in the second quarter. Housing prices in areas near the NCR increased by 11.4% and 13.8% in the first and second quarters, respectively. Overall, real estate prices in the Philippines surged by 10.2% in the first quarter of 2023 and rose even higher to 14.1% in the second quarter.

The rising costs of utilities amplify financial burdens, particularly with water reaching as much as Php10,000 monthly, according to PhilRights community partners. Unreliable water services prompt rationing or private deep well construction. In NCR and nearby provinces, electricity costs rose nearly 6% with current prices at Php12.0545 per kWh. Daily water interruptions and brownouts increased in the past year. Flood-prone resettlement areas expose residents to environmental risks, compounding challenges and impacting well-being and quality of life.

Threats of eviction and demolition are ever present and add another layer of insecurity for Filipinos. Just recently, seven individuals from Brgy. Bankal, Lapu-lapu City were arrested during a violent bout with the police while protecting their houses from being demolished. Last year, houses on an eight-kilometer stretch in Caloocan, Tondo, Sampaloc and Sta. Mesa were demolished to give way to the NLEX-SLEX Connector Road, another toll expressway for private vehicles. At the expense of 180,000 families, the Php23 billion project is expected to service 44,000 vehicles annually. Last year, residents from a housing project for retired soldiers in Cebu City were forcibly evicted due to a recent court ruling that the property belonged to a private individual. According to a resident, they have been living in the house for more than 80 years, but it will now be torn down for the construction of luxury commercial establishments.



## Our Healthcare Is Unwell

The global pandemic almost brought the Philippines' healthcare system to the brink of collapse. Now that the worst is over, many Filipinos still struggle to access basic medical services. In a truly better normal, the pandemic would have prompted essential systemic changes, but it merely magnified the inefficiencies that have endemically existed and inevitably [caused delays in fully implementing the 2019 Universal Healthcare Act \(UHC\)](#).

The World Health Organization recommends a ratio of 27 nurses per 10,000 people, meanwhile, there are only 16 nurses per 10,000 in the Philippines. According to Dr. Antonio Dans, a professor at the UP College of Medicine, [there are only 2.5 healthcare workers per Filipino, which adds up to a deficit of 116,000 doctors and 125,000 nurses](#).

Changes like shifting to online appointments for safer access during lockdowns prompted some local governments to adopt this post-pandemic. However, this added a hurdle, particularly for urban poor communities. Elderly community

members and families without resources or internet access couldn't fully utilize online transactions, even at local health centers. The community's most common concerns include the absence of previously provided free antibiotics and maintenance medicines.

Although the Mental Health Act was signed in 2018, the pandemic also challenged its implementation, and at present, there are still minimal improvements in addressing public mental health. Community-based mental health programs are yet to be institutionalized in local government units nationwide, with only [Quezon City having integrated mental health services in primary care](#).

Throughout, working conditions for healthcare workers remain dismal. The Department of Health (DOH) reports that [Php62 billion worth of Health Emergency Allowance](#) remains unpaid to healthcare workers who served during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Failing Our Future

The educational system exists within a framework that reflects both colonial legacies and commercialization, as manifested in policies dictated by the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). Unsurprisingly, this engenders a populace ill-equipped to meet the challenges of modern living.

The implementation of the K to 12 program, which adds two years to the basic education cycle, has been a significant point of contention. While aimed at enhancing the quality of education, it has faced criticism for various reasons. Removing key subjects and sanitizing educational materials through the MATATAG Curriculum further prove the downhill trend of quality education in the Philippines. According to a [World Bank report](#), learning poverty in the Philippines stood at 91%, indicating that nine out of ten children aged 10 face challenges in reading basic texts. The report additionally highlighted a pronounced disparity, noting that teaching practices in mathematics are considerably inferior in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools compared to those in the most affluent schools.

According to the current Vice President and DepEd Secretary, the K to 12 program [promises to produce employable and job-ready graduates](#). It [decongested the original basic education curriculum to 70%](#) by focusing only on five foundational competencies, namely language, reading and literacy, mathematics, makabansa or patriotism, and good manners and right conduct (GMRC). According to Vice President Duterte, it aims to improve learning outcomes to be at par with international standards. She also emphasized the importance of learning English to produce globally competitive graduates.

Teacher groups have [criticized the top-down decision-making and lack of deliberative consultations](#) to discuss the curriculum reform. They expressed strong dissatisfaction with the Department's misalignment of focus and budget allocation, particularly highlighting concerns about the lack of preparedness for school reopenings after the pandemic, low salaries and benefits for teachers, and insufficient classrooms to accommodate students. Educators have also decried the [removal of Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education \(MTB-MLE\) in the curriculum](#), highlighting that it is important that the language of instruction remains adaptive and inclusive to accommodate the diversity of learners.

According to the CHED, the [dropout rate for higher education was 35.13% during the previous school year](#). CHED Commissioner Prospero De Vera points to the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher cost of living, and [lack of subsidies](#) as reasons for the attrition rate.

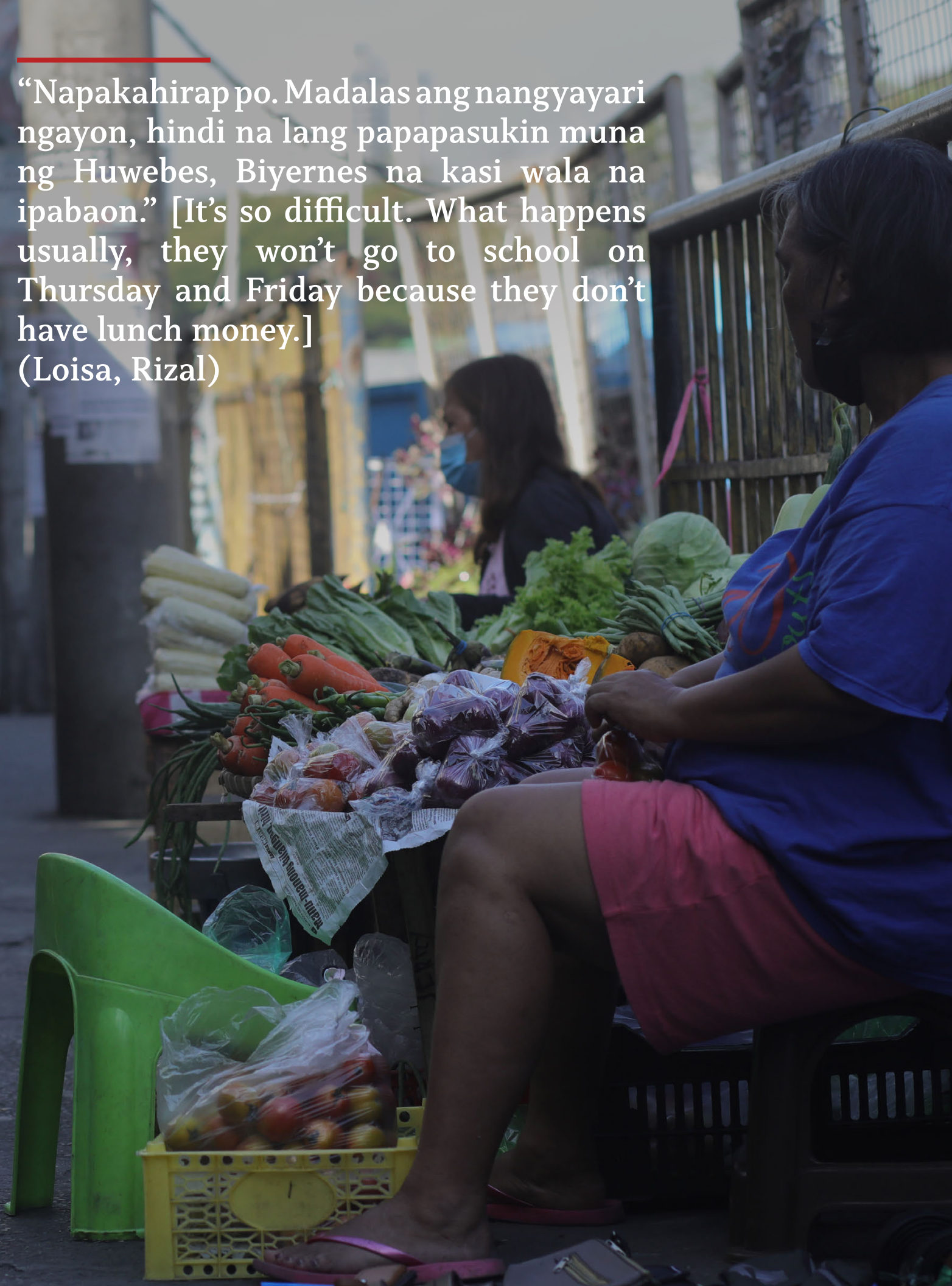
On average, only [two out of ten Filipinos can reach college](#). According to PhilRights' community partners, it has come to a point where they prioritize being able to eat for the day over taking their children to school.

The latest Annual Poverty Indicator Survey (APIS) by the Philippine Statistics Authority said [almost 20% of Filipinos aged 5 to 24 are not in school](#). A large chunk comes from the ages of 17 to 24, where students have [stopped due to marriage, employment, or lack of personal interest](#), among other reasons. This perpetuates a cycle wherein individuals may start families early and settle for low-paying jobs due to limited educational attainment.



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“Napakahirap po. Madalas ang nangyayari ngayon, hindi na lang papapasukin muna ng Huwebes, Biyernes na kasi wala na ipabaon.” [It’s so difficult. What happens usually, they won’t go to school on Thursday and Friday because they don’t have lunch money.]  
(Loisa, Rizal)





## The Gap Is Widening

Despite claims of economic growth, those living below the poverty line hardly experience any positive effects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipinos living under the poverty line grew to 20.7%. This is in contrast to the top 12 richest Filipinos whose [wealth grew almost 30% during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). According to the recent round of the Family Expenditure and Income Survey (FIES), fisherfolk and agricultural workers have a poverty incidence of 30.6% and 30% respectively. Rural areas had the highest population of people living below the poverty threshold, at almost 13 million Filipinos. The recent SWS surveys on self-rated poverty showed that more than half rated themselves as poor and only 33% consider their lives to have improved compared to the previous year.

Meanwhile, inflation peaked early in January, [reaching 8.7%](#) due to rising costs of utilities. This proved a sign of things to come as inflation [has not gone below 4% in](#)

[the past 11 months](#). Higher living costs worsen conditions, perpetuating a distressing cycle of hardship, exacerbated by programs like rice tariffication, which adversely affects vulnerable segments. Neoliberal approaches, ostensibly for economic efficiency, degrade living standards, prioritizing profit over human rights and dignity and widening the rich-poor gap.

Privatization and deregulation benefit the rich, causing suffering for the poor. Corporate interests consistently trump the well-being of the population, reinforcing economic inequality. Emphasis on economic liberalization while prioritizing job creation often sacrifices social welfare, perpetuating disparities. In this era, pressing circumstances force the negotiation of rights for survival, further disempowering large swaths of the populace.

## Part 2

### (IMP)UNITY:

# The Reign of Terror under Marcos-Duterte



Emerging from the turbulent Duterte regime, the transition to Marcos Jr.'s administration introduces a continuity of repressive policies that endanger human rights defenders and activists. The Duterte administration's brutal approach to issues like illegal drugs, terrorism, and pandemic management laid bare a governing style that seemed to disregard fundamental aspects of the rule of law and human rights. With Marcos Jr.'s ascent to power, the promise of a shift from this violent legacy remains unfulfilled, as extrajudicial killings (EJKs) and state-sanctioned violence persist, casting shadows on any pretense of accountability and respect for human rights.

Contrary to his predecessor's blatant and unpresidential tactics, Marcos Jr.'s apparent avoidance of confronting human rights issues amid criticism does not imply his support for the protection of human rights and human rights defenders. His silence is part of his general political strategy to whitewash the bloody history of their family and their coalition with Duterte's cohorts, especially in the eyes of the observing international community. Thus, it is in his interest to remain mum.



## Duterte Tactics

Despite the eschewal of Marcos Jr., his allies continue to be vocal in attacking human rights defenders. Most notably, Vice President Sara Duterte espouses the typical Duterte tactic: put malaise on human rights and democracy by throwing ignominious accusations against human rights defenders. In one of her speeches, she labeled the protest of jeepney drivers amidst their qualms on the jeepney phaseout as “painful interference” and “communist-inspired.”

The year was marred with opposition against the confidential funds proposed by the Office of the Vice President and other offices of the Executive Branch for their lack of transparency. In 2022 alone, the Office of Vice President spent [125 million pesos](#) of confidential funds not subjected to audit, depriving the public of their right to information on how the public funds were spent. But despite the calls for transparency, the Vice President has tagged her critics as enemies of the State.

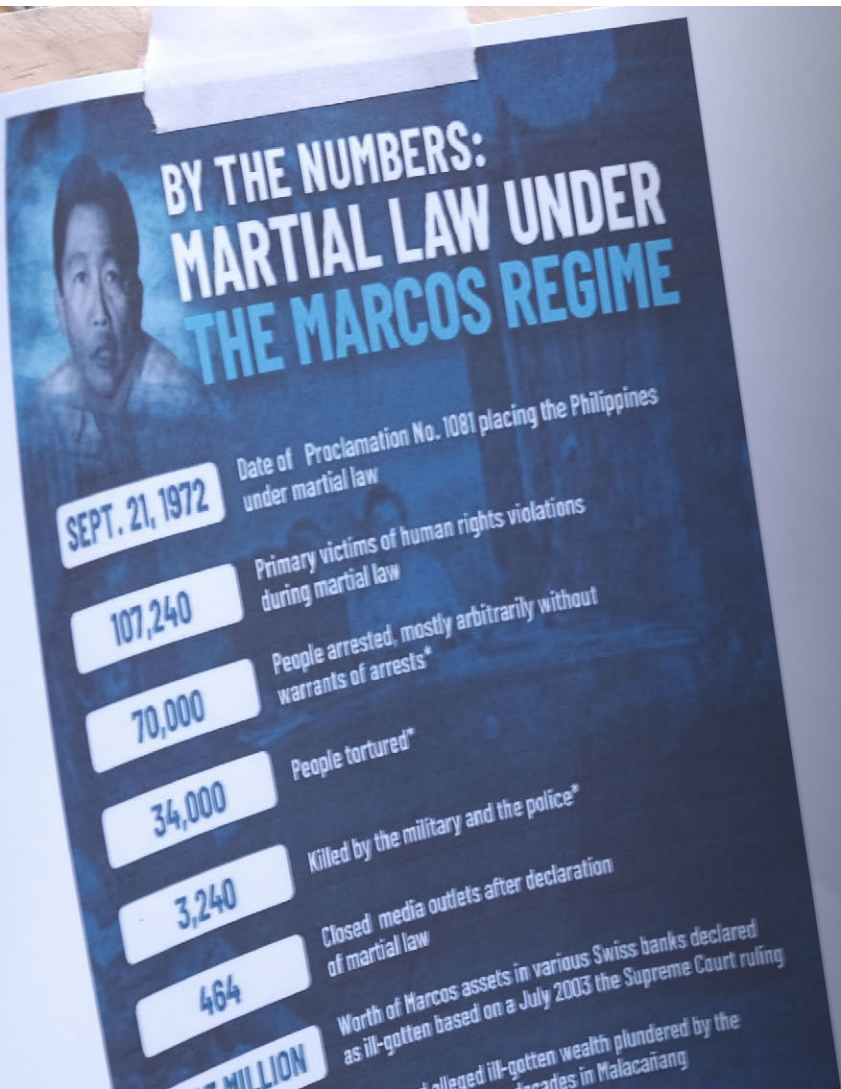
The Office of the Vice President and the Department of Education have no mandate to hold any confidential funds for the purpose of security intelligence. Along with the allegations that Vice President Sara Duterte used funds for her personal transportation to and from Davao City and the unexplained use of confidential funds in the previous year, the public fears that the proposed confidential funds would only end up in corruption schemes.

This year, the violence also continued. Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights has documented 80 incidents of extrajudicial killings (EJKs) from various sectoral groups, including farmers, indigenous people, workers, youth, and women via "counter-insurgency operations" by the Marcos Jr. government.

Among the victims was union leader [Jude Thaddeus Fernandez who was shot dead "tokhang style" in his home in](#)

[Binangonan](#), Rizal Province, by alleged agents of the Philippine National Police (PNP) on September 29, 2023. Fernandez, a staunch advocate for higher wages and an end to contractualization, was the 72nd victim of labor-related killings since 2016 and the fourth after the International Labor Organization (ILO) High Level Tripartite Mission last January 2023.

Marcos' National Security Policy for 2023-2028 adopted the Duterte-era "[whole-of-nation approach](#)," only this time aligning with the United States' geopolitical agenda in the region. Despite the growing clamor for abolishing [the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict \(NTF-ELCAC\)](#), its massive budget is maintained, and 21 out of 22 executive departments are incorporated into the Task Force, with Vice President and Education Secretary Sara Duterte designated as the co-vice chairperson.



“Makinig kayo sa lahat ng sinasabi sa palibot ninyo at tandaan ninyo, kung sino man kumontra sa confidential funds ay kumontra sa kapayapaan. Kung sino ang kumontra sa kapayapaan ay kalaban ng bayan.” [Listen to everything they have been telling around you and remember, whoever is against the confidential funds is against peace. Whoever is against peace is an enemy of the State.] (Sara Duterte, Vice-President)



## Seeing Red: Attacks against the Youth and Land and Environmental Rights Defenders

[Red-tagging and arbitrary arrests](#) persist in Marcos Jr.'s administration under the Anti-Terror Law, said CIVICUS. These incidents most frequently target youth activists and land and environmental rights defenders.

Early in the year, police dispersed protesters in [Sibuyan Island, Romblon](#) for speaking out about the Altai Philippines Mining Corporation's alleged violations in the area. This encounter in February 2023 has left several people injured.

[Six UP Diliman youth activists were arrested in April 2023](#) for staging a lightning rally in front of the US Embassy in response to the proposed participation of the country in the Balikatan exercises. [Three youth activists](#) were unlawfully arrested on June 20, 2023, for hanging a statement banner on Commonwealth Avenue.

In June 2023, [Kalinga Provincial Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict \(PTF-ELCAC\)](#) mandated all organizations in the province to obtain permission from local officials before the conduct of any activity. Groups fear that such orders could lead to red-tagging and other violations and violate the freedom of association as enshrined in international laws and the Philippine Constitution.

In September 2023, [the military sought information](#) on 67 Baguio-based organizations, a surveillance act of the security sector feared to be used for red-tagging and other threats.

The extent of NTF-ELCAC's controversial operations involving red-tagging, fabricated charges, abductions, torture, and forced surrenders has recently come to light [through the accounts of environmental activists Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano](#). Contrary to the narrative of surrender, the activists were forcibly abducted on September 19, 2023, and subsequently subjected to psychological torture by the military in Bulacan province. Similarly, [Cebu-based activists Dyan Gumanao and Armand Dayoha](#) disclosed instances of forced and fabricated surrenders when they were apprehended by the police and military on January 10, 2023.

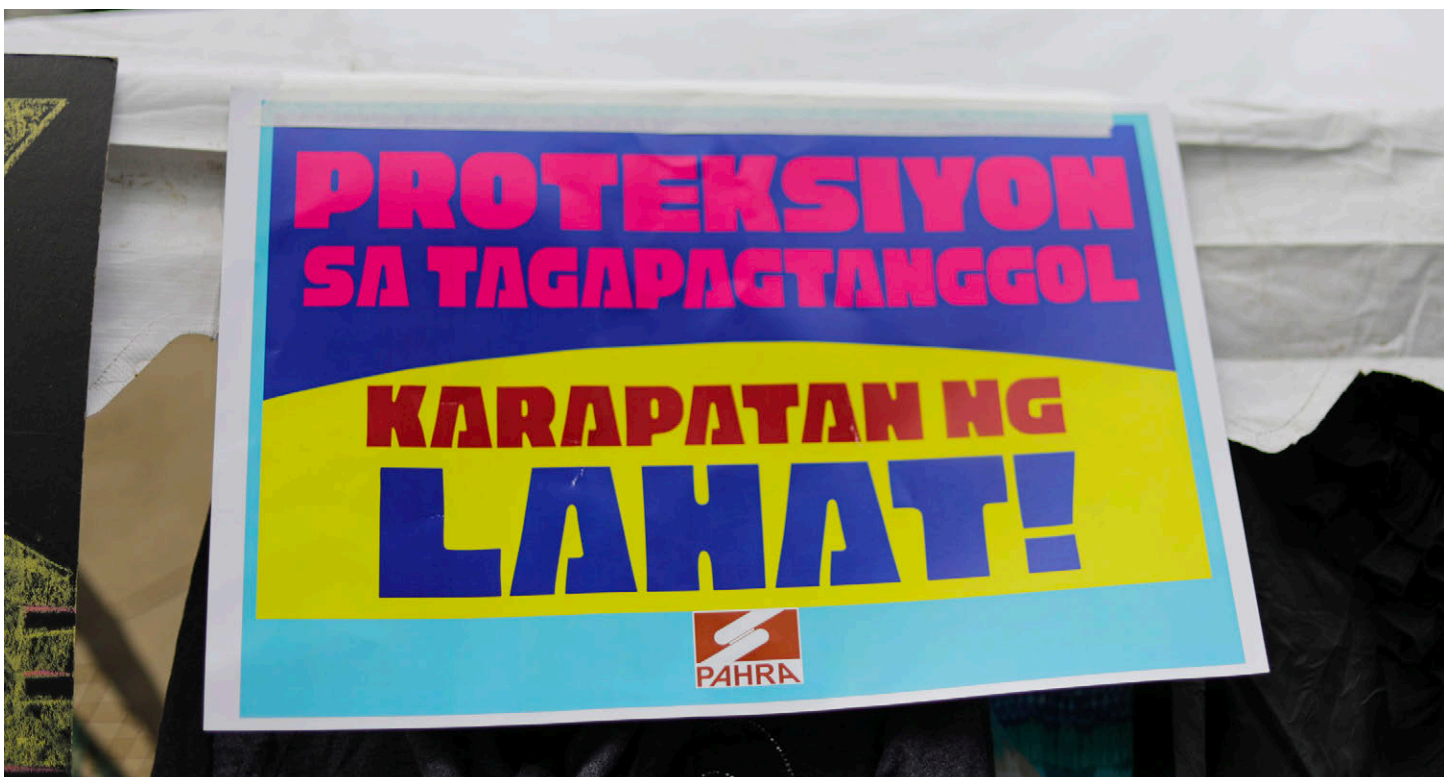
CHR Commissioner Beda Epres said during a hearing of the House Committee on Justice that there are [145 victims of enforced or involuntary disappearance since the enactment of Republic Act 10353](#) or the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act of 2012. Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND) [reported 23 cases of enforced and involuntary disappearance](#), while Karapatan has documented [11 victims](#)

[of enforced disappearances under Marcos Jr.](#) Additionally, [78 individuals have been illegally or arbitrarily arrested and detained during Marcos Jr.'s term](#), contributing to a total of 791 political prisoners, most of whom face fabricated charges. Among them, 96 are sick, and 76 are elderly, suffering from prolonged imprisonment and harsh conditions in detention.

The Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) cited the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) and other laws as pressing threats to freedom of expression and organization. The reach of the Anti-Terrorism Act and Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act (TFPSA) in targeting activists is widening. The Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) has designated [six activists in Cordillera and Mindanao as terrorists](#), and [at least 18 activists from Southern Tagalog](#) have been charged under the ATA. Additionally, church workers, human rights defenders, development workers, and journalists are confronted with

fabricated cases under the same scheme. [On November 16, 2023, fisherfolk organizer Mariano Jolongbayan was reportedly abducted and last seen in Lian, Batangas.](#) [Meanwhile, on November 20, 2023, elements of the 59th Infantry Battalion in Batangas allegedly abducted Karla Mae Monge during her engagement in field research on the impacts of land use conversion in Batangas.](#) Monge was eventually found detained at the Batangas Provincial Jail for trumped-up charges of violating the ATA.

[The number of killed environmental defenders](#) has put the Philippines as the 5th most dangerous place in the world for land and environment defenders, according to a report by Global Witness. Environmental defenders growingly decry the resumption of destructive resource extraction practices, the “development” projects that affect local ecosystems, and the collusion between the government and big companies amidst Marcos Jr.'s pretense to abide by the country's climate goals.





## Shooting the Messenger

The Philippines remains perilous for media workers, especially radio journalists—ranking [8th in the 2023 Global Impunity Index](#), making the country one of the worst impunity offenders. The Committee to Protect Journalists notes a persistent culture of self-censorship due to constant fears of violence. Despite Marcos Jr.'s more muted tone and rhetoric in facing the media, not much has been done to reverse press freedom damage from the Duterte administration. Since September 2013, 20 journalists have been murdered in the Philippines, with [four more deaths occurring since Marcos Jr. assumed office in June 2022](#).

As VeraFiles has put it, [“The Philippine media landscape remains largely grim](#) despite the change in the country's leadership in mid-2022. Attacks on journalists, which escalated during the six-year presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, have not let up since Ferdinand Marcos Jr. took office.”

In May, [Oriental Mindoro radio broadcaster Cresencio Cris Bundoquin](#) was shot dead by riding-in-tandem assailants in front of a sari-sari store. Newspaper

[photographer Joshua Abiad](#) was left wounded when unidentified gunmen shot him inside his car in Quezon City in June.

In Leyte, [two police officers harassed three press members](#) during coverage of a land dispute in July. The police officers were preventing the reporters from interviewing agrarian reform beneficiaries, which was then followed by several gunshots from an unknown source.

[In response to the red-tagging spree against him](#), broadcast journalist Atom Araullo filed civil cases against red-taggers Lorraine Badoy and Jeffrey Celiz.

In November, [Misamis Occidental radio broadcaster Juan Tumpag Jumalon](#) was shot in the head by a gunman while on air.

The weaponization of laws to stifle the media has also continued. The Cybercrime Prevention Act and the anti-libel provision of Article 355 of the Revised Penal Code were frequently used to file charges against government critics in the media.



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“Acts of aggression and harassment against media impede the exercise of press freedom, which includes the right to gather and disseminate information without interference. Such acts also undermine the fundamental right to security of person, which encompasses protection from physical harm, threats, and intimidation as set forth in Article III, Section II of the Constitution, and Article III of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”  
(Commission on Human Rights)





## Breaking the Law: Attacks against Legal and Paralegal Workers

Legal and paralegal workers are not spared from attacks, instilling fear in the legal community, especially among those who represent the interests of the basic sectors.

[BPO workers organizer and paralegal officer Alex Dolorosa](#) was found dead with stab wounds in April, after experiencing State surveillance and harassment months prior. In September, Abra lawyer [Atty. Saniata Liwliwa Gonzales-Alzate](#) was shot in front of her house in Bangued, Abra, in broad daylight. She was taken to the hospital but died later that day.

In communities where human rights organizations are active in documenting

human rights violations committed in the so-called drug war, human rights defenders lament that threats, harassment, and intimidation have intensified, especially in light of the ongoing investigations of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Community partners of PhilRights stress that despite the grim shrinking of civic space in their communities, actions shall be sustained with the utmost regard for safety and security.

In Manila, our community partners reported police surveillance activities taken against them, which hampered their efforts to assist victims' families in obtaining justice.



**STOP THE  
KILLINGS!**

**SPARK**

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“Kailangan pa ring mag-ingat, dahil pailalim ang kanilang pagkilos. Hindi katulad noon na talagang bulgaran sila. Kailangan mo talagang mag-ingat kasi hindi mo alam kung anong mga aksyon na ginagawa nila. Pero kailangan pa ring kumilos.” [We need to be vigilant, because the government’s actions aren’t so obvious. It’s unlike before (during the Duterte administration) when the attacks were rampant. You really have to be vigilant because you don’t know what they are doing. But we still need to act.]  
(Cecilia, Caloocan City)

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“Hindi na tayo makakakilos. At saka ’yung mga suggestion ng mga tao, parang balewala na lang po sa kanila. Binabalewala na lang nila. Basta ’yung sa kanila, puro korapsyon.”

[We couldn’t act anymore. And on the suggestions of the people—they seem to be nothing for them. They just disregard them. They only want to steal.]  
(Priscilla, Caloocan City)

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“Pag may mga pagkilos kasi dito, maaga pa lang nandyan na ang intel. May mga intel na dito. Mga naka-short. Mga pulis. Nakausap ko pa nga ’yung intel eh noong nakaraan.” [Whenever we have a human rights activity here, the intelligence unit of the police are immediately around. There were police intelligence personnel here. They were wearing shorts. They were police officers. I had the chance to talk with them last time.]

(Carmina, Manila)



“Um-attend kami dito ng misa tapos after niyan may activity for Martial Law sana. Kasama ako doon, kaya lang ang problema, may nakita kasi ako na taga-city hall ng Manila. So, nagpi-picture siya, nagvi-video siya. Eh kilala... buti na lang kilala ko siya. Nakikita ko kasi siya sa city hall. So, natakot ako kaya umiwas talaga ako.” [I attended a mass then there was an activity to commemorate Martial Law. I was supposed to be there, but there was a problem. I saw someone working in Manila City Hall. He was taking pictures and videos. It’s a good thing that I knew him. I used to see him in the city hall. So I became really afraid, and I avoided the activity.]  
(Sara, Manila)



## Marcos Jr.’s ‘War on Drugs’

Contrary to the proclaimed bloodless campaign of the [Buhay Ingatan, Droga Ayawan \(BIDA\) program](#), [police operations in communities remain violent](#), resembling Duterte’s Tokhang. The ongoing war against illegal drugs of the Marcos Jr. administration has resulted in [438 deaths from July 2022 to October 2023](#), as recorded by the [Dahas Project](#).

Following the victims’ deaths, families experience ongoing violations of their rights. So far, PhilRights has documented seven extrajudicial killings during the Marcos Jr.

administration. Additionally, there are 21 cases of law enforcement revisiting families, pressuring them for more documents or convincing them to sign waivers to cease their participation with the International Criminal Court (ICC). The families report intimidating and threatening approaches in requesting documents, raising concerns about potential misuse. The coercive tactics employed during the signing of waivers leave families feeling compelled to comply, as they often lack a clear understanding of the content and fear possible reprisals.

Reports from partner families suggest police operations that result in EJKs and illegal arrests continue unabated. One such incident that garnered widespread condemnation involved [the killing of 17-year-old Jemboy Baltazar in Navotas City](#) on August 2, 2023. While Jemboy and his friend were cleaning their boat, the police opened fire on them, causing Jemboy to fall into the water and sustain fatal injuries from the gunshots.

The Network Against Killings in the Philippines (NAKPhil) established in 2016 during the height of the so-called “War on Drugs” under the Rodrigo Duterte government, emphasized the continuation of grave human rights violations under the Marcos Jr. administration, citing the continued incidents of EJKs, arbitrary detention, and torture. They added that the media coverage has become less pronounced, and incidents often go unreported nationally or lack critical information, such as the age of victims. NAKPhil notes that the narrative of “nanlaban” or resisting arrest, often cited in police operations, remains prevalent.

NAKPhil said that the families they work with report intimidation by the

police, warning against cooperation with human rights workers. The government’s efforts toward justice lack inclusivity and supportive spaces for victims to report violations. Security risks persist, limiting access to legal remedies. There exist limited government efforts to provide accessible justice mechanisms. Families often need NGO intervention to access services or report cases. The climate of fear, poverty, and lack of education further impedes victims’ pursuit of justice. The current administration’s commitment to justice and human rights remains questionable.

Aside from EJKs, NAKPhil underscores the prevalence of arbitrary detention, torture, and trumped-up charges. They stressed the importance of monitoring cruel treatment, recognizing that many victims are from the poorest communities. Crowded jails and ongoing abuses hinder access to justice. A broader perspective is urged, beyond EJKs, to address various human rights violations affecting marginalized communities under the Marcos Jr. administration.







## Militarization and Aerial Bombings in the Countryside

The peace situation in rural areas has not eased, with peasant communities facing attacks from State forces. Among them are the [Fausto family in Negros Occidental last June 14, 2023 where a farmer couple, including two minors Ben \(15\) and Ravin \(12\) were reportedly killed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines \(AFP\)](#). Prior to their deaths, the family experienced harassment, red-tagging, and other forms of abuse from military elements.

Marcos Jr.'s administration has intensified State terrorism, suppressing legitimate people's struggles with escalating attacks on citizens' rights and freedoms. Groups such as Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) criticized the regime's dependency on the US superpower, evidenced by the [provision of additional military bases and facilities via the Enhance Defence Cooperation Agreement \(EDCA\)](#). From the existing five sites, four new ones were added worth \$100 million, which include Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa Ana, Cagayan; Camp Melchor Dela Cruz in Gamu, Isabela; Balabac Island in Palawan; and Lal-lo Airport in Cagayan. Critics fear this would provoke tensions with China. From 2015 to 2022, the US has provided \$1.14 billion to purchase military equipment and educational and training programs for the AFP.

[Military troops from Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the UK have also participated in Balikatan Exercises](#), allowing violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to persist. Seldom reported in mainstream media are the atrocities in the countryside where, to date, Karapatan has reported [7,712 documented victims of indiscriminate firings, 6,931 victims of bombings/shelling, 13,905 victims of forced evacuations, and 1,582,239 victims subjected to threats/harassments and intimidation in subsequent military operations](#) particularly in communities of Cagayan, Cordillera, Rizal, Negros, Mindoro, Masbate, and Mindanao. Such operations claimed the lives of activists [Ericson Acosta and Joseph Jimenez](#), peace advocate [Rogelio Posadas](#), and many others, in fake encounters in Negros. The [Makabayan bloc lawmakers filed a House resolution](#) urging an investigation into the conduct of aerial bombings in rural areas and its impact on communities, especially children. "These attacks have caused the children immense physical and emotional trauma, leaving them with long-term psychological damage; of these combat operations on the residents living in areas where," the House resolution read.

## No Trace of Accountability

The acquittal of retired Major General [Jovito Palparan](#) and five others by the Malolos Regional Trial Court for the 2006 kidnapping of the Manalo brothers is alarming, setting a troubling precedent for victims seeking justice in the Philippines. Despite Palparan's history of alleged rights abuses, including forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, the lack of accountability further perpetuates state-sponsored atrocities.

In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement (iDEFEND) voiced frustration with the lack of progress from the United Nations Joint Program and criticized the government's failure to address justice and accountability issues affecting domestic and international accountability mechanisms. These also present anticipated efforts to reshape historical narratives and secure the Marcos family's status, such as the distortion and [erasure of the dark era of the Marcos Sr. dictatorship from academic curricula](#). [Marcos Jr. excluded the EDSA People Power I anniversary from the 2024 national holidays](#). [While](#)

[court decisions favoring the Marcos family in ill-gotten wealth cases are consistent.](#)

The Duterte regime remains unaccountable for severe human rights violations, and while Marcos Jr. recalibrates his administration's decision to cooperate with the investigation of the International Criminal Court into ["under study,"](#) families remain uncertain whether his commitment to pursue justice is genuine or merely a political maneuver to mitigate divisions and save face.

As reported by partner families, curfews, intended to maintain order, are exploited for illegal arrests, undermining citizens' rights. The culture of violence persists, normalized in many communities, and possibly extending in long-term social cohesion. Cases of planted drugs, like the "palit-ulo" scheme, erode trust in law enforcement. As EJKs persist in secret, this transparency deficit is reflected in addressing human rights abuses. State-administered torture compounds violations against arrested individuals, while illegal arrests, often linked to "gambling," expose systemic problems within law enforcement.



## Part 3

# The Peoples' Response



An entire year of the Marcos Jr. presidency has come and gone, and it has become very clear that the current administration has neither the interest nor the ability to commit to a reversal from Duterte's violent brand of governance.

Instead, the hallmarks of Duterte's rule—institutionalization of violence and impunity, normalization of disinformation, weaponization of laws, and distortion of human rights values—remain firmly entrenched under Marcos Jr.'s administration. Strategies may have shifted and Duterte's bombast may have been replaced with Marcos Jr.'s willful avoidance of these issues but on-ground realities continue to paint a dark picture for human rights.

As has been evident throughout this report, the Philippines is in a continuing human rights crisis. The interrelatedness of socioeconomic deprivation and civic-political repression is as stark as ever, the impacts of which amplify each other and further hinder the claiming and defense of peoples' rights. Throughout, the public continues to be actively fed a potent mix of disinformation, revisionist narratives, and Marcos legacy-affirming propaganda that suppresses substantive public discourse on human rights and social justice.



## The Failure of 2022

The hope that was felt thanks to the nascent social movements emerging from an engaged, energized, mostly young voting public that opposed Duterte's governance of violence in 2022 has seemingly fizzled when faced with the overwhelming victory of the Marcos-Duterte tandem in the last national elections.

If last year's election has taught us anything, it is that grassroots campaigning, glitzy and celebrity-riddled sorties, and a slate of candidates with platforms that consciously disavow the worst of Duterte's rule are no match to the tried-and-tested machinations of a few dozen political families, especially when bolstered by a sophisticated online disinformation apparatus and good old-fashioned vote-buying. The results were as dismal as they are predictable: The Marcoses are back in power while the Dutertes continue to hold immense influence over national affairs. It could simply be that many of those who just

a year ago were vocal, active, and committed are now resigned that things don't really get better. There is exhaustion and a sense of betrayal, especially felt among those whose efforts to educate, raise questions, and present alternatives were met with the realization that their labors did not bear fruit.

Finally, there is a redirection of energies. Times are harder than ever and survival is paramount and so many are choosing to step back and refocus their energies inward and toward their families, their immediate circles.

This depiction is perhaps not far off from reality. But look a little deeper and a more compelling truth emerges. The peoples' resistance may have taken a few steps back, but it has not wound down, nor will it ever stop.



## Resetting the Resistance

First, the International Criminal Court’s investigation into the drug-related killings committed under Duterte’s rule as president of the Philippines and as mayor of Davao City overcame a major hurdle in July when the ICC’s Appeals Chamber [rejected](#) the appeal of the Philippine government to end the ICC prosecutor’s investigation. The Chamber’s decision was a much-needed morale booster for the hundreds of family members who have been participating in the ICC process by submitting communications about their cases, following months of uncertainty and intensifying harassment, threats, and disinformation all to discourage them from seeking justice.

This also means that the next few years require a lot of support for the families and the organizations that they are working with. As human rights organizations, including PhilRights, are continuing the important

work of documenting cases of human rights violations related to the so-called drug war, the need for long-term support for rights-claiming and justice-seeking initiatives of victims and families will continue to mount. More than ever, the public must not let this thirst for justice and accountability and the surfacing of the truth fizzle out.

Second, the pending Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill needs heightened public support. In the lower house, [House Bill 77](#) was approved by the Committee on Human Rights, paving the way for its eventual introduction into the Congressional plenary. In the Senate, opposition senator Risa Hontiveros filed in September [Senate Bill 2447](#) which remains pending in the Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

Predictably, the NTF-ELCAC condemned the bill as anti-democracy and in violation of

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“Kailangan ’yung pagtutulak ng HR laws kasi mahirap iinstitutionalize ang isang bagay ano, kung walang batas. So kaya naman tinutulak natin ’yung mga batas na papabor sa karapatang pantao. Tulad ng Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill, gusto nating maipasa ito kasi proteksyon ito sa mga ito. Iniisip din natin mag-engage sa pinapasang batas criminalizing red-tagging.” [We need to push for the passage of human rights laws because it’s difficult to institutionalize something without a law. That’s why we are pushing for laws on human rights. Like in the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill, we want to have it passed because it is a protection. We are also engaging with bills that aim to criminalize red-tagging.] (Rommel Yamzon, Secretary-General, PAHRA)



anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering legislation: “The impending approval of HB No. 77 or the ‘Human Rights Defenders’ Protection Act’ (HRDPA) before the House Committee on Human Rights in the House of Representatives on February 28, 2023, is a grave, vicious, and insidious threat against the Philippines’ democratic way of life.”

The continued attacks against human rights defenders and the resolute opposition from State agencies towards their proposed policies underscore the challenges facing human rights protection in a shrinking civic space. It is critical to recognize the vital role that human rights defenders play in safeguarding our fundamental freedoms, and efforts must be made to provide adequate legal and institutional safeguards to protect them from harm. Policymakers must recognize that the measures proposed by these defenders are intended to improve the lives of citizens and align with international human rights standards. Therefore, it is necessary to address the attacks and work towards creating a sustainable protective framework for human rights defenders.

These legislative measures are much needed interventions to safeguard the growing ranks of human rights defenders whose safety and wellbeing are actively at risk for simply doing their part in advocating for the rights and freedoms of the people. The urgency cannot be overstated, with the Philippines being [one of the most dangerous countries in the world for HRDs](#), especially for land and environmental defenders. As House Bill 77 author Rep. Edcel Lagman puts it:

“The tragic plight of Filipino HRDs as a result of the relentless persecution against them by the government shamefully aggravates the State’s culpable non-compliance with the constitutional mandate that the ‘State values the dignity of every human person and guarantees full respect for human rights’”

Third, we are compelled to counter the normalization of weaponizing the law against those who dare to speak up, raise questions, or otherwise refuse to be lulled by disinformation and propaganda. The [release of former senator Leila de Lima](#) in November after nearly seven years of detention for trumped-up drug charges is a fervent reminder that the truth will always find a way of coming out. After multiple witnesses have [recanted their testimonies](#) alleging de Lima’s involvement in illegal drug activities, the former senator has now been granted bail on the one remaining drug charge against her.

Still, de Lima is but one of an [increasing number of HRDs](#) who have had to face [State persecution](#) couched under laws such as the Dangerous Drugs Act and the [draconian Anti-Terror Law](#).

And then there is the Duterte-era [Executive Order No. 70](#), which promulgated the application of the whole-of-nation approach to combat insurgency and birthed the many-headed beast that is the [National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict \(NTF-ELCAC\)](#). In its short life, the NTF-ELCAC has been [reckless](#), [questionably funded](#), and [actively dangerous](#). No less than a United Nations Special Rapporteur has [called for the disbandment](#) of the task force for going beyond its mandate and “operating with impunity.”

This practiced disregard for due process and the abuse of power on display go against the most basic tenets of our democracy. We the people need to demand the immediate end to the weaponization of laws against our fellow citizens.



## The Peoples' (Re)Awakening

In the face of all these issues, human rights defenders and advocates continue to take action. Sustained monitoring and documentation in communities considered as hotspots for human rights violations have led to a growing public record of the atrocities committed in the context of the so-called drug war. Coordinated awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts by a growing number of human rights educators and communicators are contributing immensely to the task of countering the distortion of human rights concepts and the stigmatization of human rights work. Support services for victims and families, including livelihood, medical, psychosocial, and spiritual support are sustained by the quiet contributions of concerned organizations and individuals. From these efforts, more and more victims, families, and concerned Filipinos are finding it in themselves to take on the cause of justice and human rights. From these efforts, it is clear that resistance

to anti-human rights and anti-democratic governance has not and will not cease.

Ultimately, our situation boils down to a question of values. How do we as citizens take on the task of shaping the future of our nation? If it is peace and prosperity for all, it also goes without saying that all rights of all must be respected, protected, and fulfilled.

The dubious *gift* that is experiencing firsthand a Marcos Jr. presidency—a slew of broken promises, worsening socioeconomic conditions, continuing violence, and a blatant prioritization of the interests of the wealthy few—will no doubt create a fertile space for a renewed resistance to emerge. Our tasks, for those willing to take them on, offer promising glimpses of the restoration of our human rights values and a reclaiming of the ideals upon which our troubled democracy may be reborn.





# PANTAO REPORTS



## **We Turn the Tide: Seeking Justice amidst a Human Rights Crisis**

Findings of the 2017-2022 Documentation of Extrajudicial Killings (EJKs) and Other Human Rights Violations Committed under the so-called War on Drugs | **JULY 2023**

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