

# Rodrigo Duterte: the president warlord of the Philippines - “Am I the death squad? True. That is true,”

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**Thousands have been killed in his domestic anti-drug campaign. Now, as he hosts Trump at a summit in Manila, new brutal revelations put him back in the headlines.**

*‘Am I the death squad? That is true’*: Rodrigo Duterte at last week’s Apec summit in Da Nang

The litany of horrific comments that have catapulted the Philippine leader, Rodrigo Duterte, to international notoriety is so exhaustive that it is hard to choose his most transgressive lines. Nothing, it seems, is out of bounds.

In September 2016, for example, he glowingly made reference to the Holocaust as an analogy for his brutal war on drugs [1]. “Hitler massacred three million Jews,” he said. “Now, there are three million drug addicts. I’d be happy to slaughter them.”

Duterte has also boasted of the days when he cruised around on his motorbike looking for people to kill and of throwing a man out of a helicopter [2]. He even joked about missing out on the chance to rape a beautiful Australian missionary before she was murdered in a jail siege.

Last week, Duterte made the headlines again. “At the age of 16, I already killed someone,” he said. “A real person, a rumble, a stabbing. I was just 16 years old. It was just over a look. How much more now that I am president?”

The Philippine head was speaking to the Filipino community in the Vietnamese city of Da Nang, ahead of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit, which Donald Trump is also attending. A brief meeting between the two at Apec was described as “warm” by Duterte’s staff, but the big one will be their scheduled bilateral meeting tomorrow, the final stop on Trump’s Asia tour, at the summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), in the Philippines capital, Manila.

Trump, of course, is hardly guilty of the crimes Duterte happily trumpets. But with their populist assertions, tendency for hyperbole and denigration of women, as well as attacks on the mainstream press and total disdain for expected political behaviour, it is perhaps no surprise that comparisons have already been drawn between the two.

While Duterte called Barack Obama “a son of a whore”, the Trump and Duterte relationship seems to be off to a much better start. A leaked copy of a phone call between them revealed that Trump had lavished praise on Duterte for an “unbelievable job” in his war on drugs [3].

A former prosecutor and long-time mayor of Davao, a city on the island of Mindanao, Duterte’s strongman platform – his campaign logo featured a clenched fist – gained widespread popularity

across the Philippines.

He rose to power on the back of blustering promises to eradicate drugs and crime, pledging a crackdown [4] that would see 100,000 people slaughtered and the bodies of drug users fed to the fish in Manila Bay. His people were sufficiently impressed by the tough-talking leader, who promised to stop the country from descending into what he characterised as a narco state, and he was elected last May.

Nicknamed “the Punisher”, the 72-year-old was born in Maasin. The makings of his gangster-like persona appear to have been formed from an early age. He was a bully who was expelled from school and, aged 15, reportedly carried a gun.

“He was kicked out of some schools, and even shot a classmate, but he never got punished for anything. He got away with it,” Philippine senator Antonio Trillanes, one of Duterte’s fiercest critics, told the Observer. “So I believe that contributed to his mindset of impunity, because he was never punished. He killed people, but it just went away.”

Duterte went on to study law and become a prosecutor, eventually working his way up to vice and then mayor of Davao, a position he held for more than 20 years.

“I believe the only real crisis he had growing up was when his father died and the political power and wealth dissipated. He couldn’t stand being a regular guy. So he was forced to eat humble pie and work his way up,” says Trillanes. “From that point on, this guy who relished that life of power and wealth did not want to experience life without it. So from that point on, he didn’t let go.”

Duterte’s violent campaign has not ended crime or solved the problems associated with drugs. A document that was part of his marriage annulment to Elizabeth Zimmerman in 1998 is also revealing. In the psychological assessment of Duterte detailed in the report, the doctor concluded that he was suffering from narcissistic personality disorder, with aggressive tendencies including a “grandiose sense of self and entitlement” and “a pervasive tendency to demean, humiliate others”.

It was in Davao in the 1980s that Duterte would first try out his crackdown on drugs and crime, a policy that regularly saw dead bodies turn up on the streets. Human Rights Watch has long detailed allegations of the “Davao death squads” while Duterte was mayor, claiming that more than 1,000 people were killed, including suspected drug users and dealers, street children, as well as journalists critical of his rule.

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Even Duterte once appeared to openly confess as much. “Am I the death squad? True. That is true,” he told his local TV show in May 2015.

While Duterte’s aides often furiously back-pedal on the president’s statements, suggesting his outlandish comments should not be taken literally or were meant in jest, the president has proved to be a man of his word when it comes to the “drug war”.

Since he assumed office on 30 June last year, at least 7,000 Filipinos have been killed, almost 4,000 by police and several thousand more by purported vigilantes. Grisly scenes of the killings quickly overwhelmed the local and international press – jarring images of people slain in the street in the middle of the night, their heads wrapped in packing tape, often next to cardboard signs accusing them of being a drug dealer, user or criminal. One local paper, the Inquirer, started a “kill list” in an attempt to keep track of all the dead.

More than a year into his rule, the number of extrajudicial killings has surpassed the number of those killed during the murderous reign of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the Philippines for two decades.

Assessing one year of Duterte rule, Amnesty International issued a statement in June noting that thousands of Filipinos have been killed by, or at the behest of, a police force that acts outside the law, on the orders of the president.

“Duterte’s violent campaign has not ended crime or solved the problems associated with drugs,” said James Gomez, Amnesty International’s director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. “What it has done is turn the country into an even more dangerous place, further undermined the rule of law and earned him notoriety as a leader responsible for the death of thousands of his own citizens.”

While Duterte’s war has sparked major international condemnation, the president himself has remained impervious. Instead, he has offered immunity to police killing in the name of the “drug war”, while his government has denied allegations of death squads.

It has also strived to silence its most outspoken critics, including jailing Senator Leila de Lima, who, as chair of the Commission on Human Rights, spearheaded an investigation into the Davao death squad in 2009. Duterte also put some Filipinos on edge this September when, to deal with a terrorist insurgency in Marawi, he declared martial law throughout Mindanao. The congress has since voted to keep that in place until 31 December.

Despite all the controversies that have plagued his administration, until a recent dip in the polls, the president has remained resoundingly popular. Nationally, satisfaction with the “drug war” is at 63%, according to a poll released by Social Weather Stations in October, although most say they also believe suspects should be captured alive.

In a move he said he hoped would appease “bleeding hearts”, last month Duterte ordered the police to end all their operations in relation to drugs, instead placing the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) in charge.

Asked how to best understand who Duterte really is, long-time Filipino broadcaster and columnist Solita Monsod says the president is best explained by the psychological assessment he underwent during the annulment of his marriage. “You cannot judge this man with the usual methods because the man has a disorder... this guy has mental health problems.”

At least be glad, she adds, he doesn’t have access to a nuclear button.

## **THE DUTERTE FILE**

Born 28 March 1945 in Maasin to a political family. His father was once a provincial governor and his mother a teacher. He trained as a lawyer, rising to become a state prosecutor, before becoming the mayor of Davao in 1988. Twice married, four children.

Best of times Gained widespread popular support for transforming Davao from “murder city” to the safest place in the Philippines.

**Worst of times** Threatening to leave the UN after it criticised his “war on drugs” as a crime under international law. Since the start of his presidency, government figures show police have killed close to 3,500 “drug personalities”, while more than 2,000 others have been killed in drug-related crimes and thousands more killed in unexplained circumstances.

**What he says** “Forget the laws on human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because I’d kill you. I’ll dump all of you into Manila Bay and fatten all the fish there.” Campaign rally speech.

**What others say** “One thing about my brother is he is hard-headed. The more you tell him not to do it, the more he will do it. He needs to tone down on his anger. He needs anger management.”  
Emmanuel Duterte, *New York Times*

**Kate Lamb**

\* The Guardian. Sunday 12 November 2017 00.05 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/12/rodrigo-duterte-president-philippines-anti-drugs-campaign-thousands-killed>

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## **Philippines president says he once stabbed someone to death**

**Rodrigo Duterte claims he killed a person as a teenager, in defiant speech to promote his drug war before summit of world leaders.**

The Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, has said he stabbed a person to death as a teenager, in a defiant speech to promote his drug war ahead of a summit of world leaders in Manila.

Speaking to the local Filipino community in the Vietnamese city of Da Nang on Thursday, Duterte also threatened to slap a UN rights rapporteur if he met her, and used obscene language to hit back at critics of his deadly drugs crackdown.

“When I was a teenager, I would go in and out of jail. I’d have rumbles here, rumbles there,” said Duterte, who is in Da Nang for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit.

“At the age of 16, I already killed someone. A real person, a rumble, a stabbing. I was just 16 years old. It was just over a look. How much more now that I am president?”

Duterte won last year’s presidential elections after promising to eradicate illegal drugs with an unprecedented crackdown that would see up to 100,000 people killed. Since he took office 16 months ago, police say they have killed 3,967 people. Another 2,290 people were murdered in drug-related crimes, while thousands of other deaths remain unsolved, according to government data.

Duterte, 72, remains popular with many Filipinos who believe he is making society safer. But critics at home and abroad say he is orchestrating a campaign of extrajudicial mass murder, carried out by corrupt police and hired vigilantes.

He at times denies inciting police or others to kill, but also consistently generates headlines for his abusive language and incendiary comments defending the drug war.

Duterte said last year he would be “happy to slaughter” 3 million drug addicts and branded then US president Barack Obama a “son of a whore” for criticising the crackdown.

Duterte also said in December last year that he had personally shot dead criminal suspects when he

was mayor of southern Davao city to set an example for the police.

His then spokesman later sought to clarify the remarks, saying the killings took place during a "legitimate police action".

Esquire magazine quoted Duterte as saying in an interview before he became president that he "maybe" stabbed someone to death when he was 17 years old, in what may be a reference to the incident described in Da Nang.

In an election campaign rally, Duterte also said he was expelled from college for shooting a fellow student who was insulting him. The victim reportedly survived.

Duterte's aides have repeatedly told journalists not to believe everything the president says, cautioning that he often jokes or indulges in "hyperbole".

His new spokesman, Harry Roque, indicated that may be the case with his stabbing-to-death claim. "I think it was in jest. The Pres uses colourful language when w Pinoys (Filipinos) overseas," Roque said in a text message.

In Da Nang, Duterte also targeted the United Nations' special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings, Agnes Callamard, who has been a frequent critic of the drug war. "This rapporteur," he said, after referring to Callamard by name. "I will slap her in front of you. Why? Because you are insulting me."

Duterte's latest comments come days before he hosts the US president, Donald Trump, and other leaders for the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) summit.

Trump is due to fly into Manila from Vietnam along with other world leaders on Sunday evening before two days of talks.

Trump has praised Duterte's handling of the drug war, telling the Philippine leader in a telephone call in April that he was doing a "great job".

Human rights campaigners have said the summit will be a public relations coup for Duterte, with Trump and other leaders expected to ignore the drug war controversy.

"Duterte will enjoy the gift of tacit silence from east Asian leaders on his murderous drug war during the upcoming summit," Phelim Kine, the deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch, told AFP.

Adding to a sense of confidence ahead of the event, Duterte on Thursday also proposed hosting a global summit on human rights in which all nations would be placed under the microscope.

"Let us investigate all violations of human rights committed by all governments," he said, specifically naming the US, France and Russia.

**Agence France-Presse** in Da Nang

\* The Guardian. Friday 10 November 2017 09.56 GMT Last modified on Friday 10 November 2017 10.12 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/10/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-says-he-once-stabbed-someone-to-death>

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## Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/30/rodrigo-duterte-vows-to-kill-3-million-drug-addicts-and-likens-himself-to-hitler>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-personally-killed-criminals>
- [3] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/24/trump-duterte-us-philippines-drugs-crack-down>
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/19/philippine-president-rodrigo-duterte-extend-drug-war-kill-them-all>