

Davao (Philippines) - Extrajudicial Killings & Rodrigo Duterte: The Rise of Philippines' Death Squad Mayor

"Duterte and others like him will pose a grave danger to the safety of the citizens they are elected to protect"

Saturday 14 May 2016, by [Human Rights Watch](#), [KINE Phelim](#) (Date first published: 17 July 2015).

For Rodrigo Duterte, the brutal death squads that have claimed the lives of more than 1,000 people [1] during his tenure as mayor of Davao City in the Philippines' main southern island of Mindanao are not a problem. They're a political platform.

Duterte publicly admitted his direct links to the Davao death squad during a May 24 live broadcast of his weekly television talk show [2]. "Am I the death squad? True. That is true," Duterte said on-air while discussing his accomplishments as Davao's chief executive. He then pledged that if he became president of the Philippines he would execute 100,000 more criminals and dump their bodies in Manila Bay.

Duterte's comments echoed those he made on May 15, which asserted the summary killing of suspected criminals as a key plank to his approach to public security [3]: "We're the ninth safest city. How do you think I did it? How did I reach that title among the world's safest cities? Kill them all [criminals]."

Duterte's claim of responsibility for the extrajudicial killings of hundreds of people has drawn deafening silence from President Benigno Aquino III. And aside from an expression of outrage from Philippines Secretary of Justice Leila De Lima [4], Duterte's comments have drawn scant public criticism.

Instead, observers describe Duterte's public admission of complicity with the Davao death squad as an act of shrewd political branding [5] in the lead-up to presidential elections in May 2016. Those political ambitions are not misplaced. Recent public opinion polls place Duterte as the public's third most popular potential candidate [6] out of a field of known presidential hopefuls. On May 22, Vice President Jejomar Binay told reporters that he was considering Duterte as his running mate in his presidential bid next year [7].

The apparent public and political support for that initiative betrays a willful ignorance of the sinister reality of Duterte's approach to public order. The operation of "death squads" in Davao while Duterte has been the city's mayor has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of street children, petty criminals, and petty drug dealers since 1998 [8].

Duterte himself took to the airwaves in 2001-2002 to issue threats against what he considered undesirable elements in Davao. Some of the criminals whose names he announced were later found dead, apparent victims of the death squad.

Philippine authorities have yet to successfully prosecute anyone for any of these murders. In the meantime, the killings continue [9] and copycat death squad operations have emerged in other cities [10].

There is a shameful history of political tolerance for Duterte's tactics that reaches the highest levels of the Philippine government. Duterte boasted at a public hearing of the Philippine Senate in February 2014 that he would "gladly kill" a suspected smuggler if he came to Davao [11]. Rather than condemn Duterte's appalling threat, lawmakers expressed sympathy with his views. Senator Cynthia Villar, chairperson of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Food, which held the hearing, responded to Duterte's threat by saying [12], "In Mindanao, you have to be tough because if not, there will be several abuses." Senator Grace Poe, a putative 2016 presidential election candidate, likewise failed to challenge Duterte's affront to the rule of law and instead clucked about how children might misconstrue Duterte's death threat [13].

This tolerance from lawmakers for Duterte speaks volumes about the failure of successive Philippine governments to address the country's problem of extrajudicial killings. Extrajudicial executions [14], including politically motivated killings, by state security forces have been a longstanding problem in the Philippines. Although the number of killings has decreased dramatically in recent years compared to a decade ago, they continue largely with impunity.

Exhibit A of the government's failure to prosecute the perpetrators of extrajudicial killings is the official response to the November 2009 Maguindanao massacre [15] in which a "private army" financed by the powerful Ampatuan family killed 58 people including more than 30 media workers. Almost six years later, the case is in effective judicial limbo [16], with no successful prosecutions and a total of 87 suspects still at large [17].

A much-vaunted initiative by the administration to address impunity – the creation in 2012 of a so-called superbody to expedite the investigation and prosecution of cases of extrajudicial killings [18] – has remained largely inactive even as Philippine human rights groups report new cases. With the notable exception of the government's move in March 2015 to prosecute the masterminds behind the Tagum Death Squad [19], after a detailed Human Rights Watch report, the perpetrators of these crimes remain at large.

Duterte's boastful brand of violent impunity should be a path to prosecution, not a platform for political office. Until the government adopts a zero tolerance attitude toward public officials who publicly endorse extrajudicial killings as an acceptable approach to governance, Duterte and others like him will pose a grave danger to the safety of the citizens they are elected to protect.

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P.S.

* "The Rise of Philippines' Death Squad Mayor". Published in The Mark News. JULY 17, 2015: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/17/rodrigo-duterte-rise-philippines-death-squad-mayor>

Footnotes

- [1] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/434243/davao-death-squad-strikes-again>
- [2] <http://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/94302-rodrigo-duterte-davao-death-squad>
- [3] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/691527/dutertes-secret-in-keeping-davao-city-phs-safest-kill-criminals>
- [4] <http://www.interaksyon.com/article/111121/duterte-could-be-liable-for-links-to-death-squads-says-de-lima>
- [5] <http://opinion.inquirer.net/85269/dutertes-safe-city>
- [6] <http://www.interaksyon.com/article/111121/duterte-could-be-liable-for-links-to-death-squads-says-de-lima>
- [7] <http://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/94024-binay-duterte-2016-elections>
- [8] See available on ESSF (article 37947), [Mindanao \(Philippines\): Dismantle 'Davao Death Squad'](#).
- [9] <http://philippinestravelsite.com/chr-alarms-on-davao-death-squad-copycats/>
- [10] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/20/philippines-death-squad-linked-hundreds-killings>
- [11] <http://www.rappler.com/business/industries/247-agriculture/49577-duterte-tags-bangayan-s-mugger-senate-hearing>
- [12] <http://manilastandardtoday.com/news/-main-stories/top-stories/139832/bangayan-should-be-charged-villar-says.html>
- [13] <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2015/06/04/1461994/grace-im-qualified-run-president>
- [14] See available on ESSF (article 37948), [Statement on Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines](#).
- [15] <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/11/16/they-own-people/ampatuans-state-backed-militias-and-killings-southern-philippines>
- [16] <http://cmfr-phil.org/statements/fffj-one-more-delay-in-a-long-list-of-delays/>
- [17] <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2014/10/16/1380638/bail-okd-16-maguindanao-massacre-suspects>
- [18] See, available on ESSF (article 37949), [Philippines: Surge of Journalist Killings, Justice Failures – Entrenched Rights Problems Demand Government Action](#).
- [19] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/04/dispatches-philippines-death-squad-under-fire>