

Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte pulls police out of brutal war on drugs

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Deadly crackdown, which has seen thousands killed, will be left to drug enforcement agency, president's office says.

Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte has ordered police to end all operations in his deadly war on drugs after a 15-month campaign in which officers have killed thousands.

Duterte's office released a public memorandum telling police, the military and other state bodies to leave the conduct of all campaigns and operations to the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA).

The agency's 1,800 staff make up just over 1% of the 160,000-strong national police, meaning the new order could significantly reduce the extrajudicial killings.

The statement did not specify why Duterte, nicknamed "the Punisher" for his blood-soaked approach to policing, had made the change.

It comes at a time of waning public support for country-wide operations that police say have killed more than 3,900 "drug personalities" since last July, although activists say these are alleged drug users and suspected small-time dealers.

More than 2,000 other people have also been killed in drug-related crimes and thousands more murdered in unexplained circumstances, according to police data.

It was the second time the leader decreed that the agency should lead the drugs war. He suspended police anti-drugs operations in late January, to cleanse a force he called "corrupt to the core", but rescinded the decision five weeks later.

The memorandum, signed on Tuesday, orders officers at all times to "maintain police visibility, as a deterrent to illegal activities". Its aim is "to bring order to the operation or campaign against illegal drugs", the document says.

The mercurial leader has rebuffed any criticism and said he is "happy to slaughter" millions of addicts, evening dismissing the deaths of children as "collateral damage".

The killing of a 17-year-old student in August sparked nationwide protests and multiple government investigations. Like many of the shootings, police alleged they were acting in self-defence after he resisted arrest. But this time, security camera footage showed the teenager was in custody before he died.

A poll released on Sunday showed a sharp decline in public opinion about Duterte's performance and personality, although sentiment about him remained positive overall. The former mayor and

prosecutor from outside the Manila-based elite have remained popular domestically throughout his tenure.

International support has been mixed. The European Union had previously cited “credible reports” that Philippine police falsify evidence to justify extrajudicial killings.

Under Barack Obama, relations soured between the former US colony and Washington when Duterte called the US leader a “son of a whore” following repeated human rights complaints.

Since then, Manila has increasingly looked to Beijing and Moscow as new backers. Duterte said on Wednesday that Russia was giving 5,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles to the Philippines, believed to be the first ever shipment of Russian weapons. The cache would follow around 6,000 guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition donated by China earlier this year.

Donald Trump, however, has praised Duterte for what he said was an “unbelievable job” in a fight against illegal drugs [1].

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Reuters contributed to this report

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/12/philippines-rodrico-duterte-police-war-drugs>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/24/trump-duterte-us-philippines-drugs-crack-down>