

Covid-19: The Philippines' Coronavirus Lockdown Is Becoming a Crackdown

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Curfew violators, poor and displaced residents, activists, and alleged “fake news” disseminators are facing arrest and persecution as they accuse authorities of failing to provide relief.

On March 12, hours before Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte announced a community quarantine would be implemented in Metro Manila due to the coronavirus outbreak, an informal settlement in the city was demolished, leaving the vast majority of its more than 1,000 residents homeless. Days later, the quarantine was made into an island-wide lockdown of Luzon, where Manila is located, and many municipalities implemented curfews and other restrictions on movement. Within a week, the settlement's impoverished residents had lost their shelter and, stranded on the streets, become *de facto* curfew violators in the midst of a global pandemic.

The Philippines, like many developing countries, is being dealt a particularly brutal blow by the coronavirus. Social distancing is impossible in cramped urban areas. For Filipinos living paycheck to paycheck, the abrupt loss of work is devastating families. But Duterte's stewardship during the coronavirus pandemic has been punctuated by what rights advocates call a chilling disregard for the poor and the persecuted.

Activists in Mindanao, the country's southernmost island, have been arrested since their cities went into states of lockdown or quarantine – a normal counterinsurgency practice made especially harmful during the pandemic. Others in Negros, already targeted by military operations aimed at defeating the communist New People's Army (NPA) militant group, say they have received unwelcome visits from armed forces since that island was locked down.

Congress last week [granted Duterte](#) temporary emergency powers during the coronavirus crisis, drawing criticism from rights advocates. The powers, which will be in place for three months but can be extended by Congress, contain provisions subjecting those who spread “false information regarding the COVID-19 crisis” to up to two months in jail and a fine of up to 1 million pesos (\$19,500).

The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines, a press group, [said in a statement](#) the law makes the government “the arbiter of what is true or false,” a grave concern as administration officials themselves have spread false information. (Duterte downplayed the threat of the virus in the past; his spokesman, Salvador Panelo, has [falsely claimed](#) the virus can be fended off with bananas and salt water.) Days later, a teacher and her son in General Santos, a city in Mindanao, were [arrested without warrants](#) and charged with inciting to sedition and disobedience to authority after criticizing their city's mayor and encouraging people to raid a gym where they claimed food was stocked.

For the country's rights activists, journalists, and environmental defenders, the new measures have provoked fears the targets on their back will widen – and that the laws, like past emergency proclamations in the Philippines, will not be quickly rolled back once the pandemic's peak has passed.

The Philippines outside of Manila is especially vulnerable to the coronavirus. Many provinces have little to no testing capacity, and hospitals remain ill-equipped to fight the pandemic. Thousands fled Manila for the provinces between March 12, when Duterte announced the lockdown, and midnight on March 15, when it began. With the military tasked to assist in enforcing quarantine measures throughout the country, Duterte [declared a unilateral ceasefire](#) with the NPA on March 18 to focus on the pandemic.

The next day, Gloria Tumalon, a Manobo indigenous activist and opponent of mining projects, was arrested in the Surigao del Sur region of Mindanao. Tumalon was [one of 468 people](#) accused of being a NPA member, a charge it disputed. Environmental defenders in Mindanao, especially indigenous opponents of mining and agriculture projects, are often labeled as communists, a practice known as “red-tagging.” Tumalon has previously served in local government and as an indigenous representative to national commissions; her sister, Eufemia Cullamat, is a congressional representative.

The arrest is related to an incident from December 2018 and has no surface-level relation to the coronavirus. Neither did the [arrest](#) of Teresita Naul, a rights defender and paralegal, on March 15 in Cagayan de Oro, made as that city was going into enhanced community quarantine.

They and the General Santos arrests are “a combination of those related to the lockdowns and to the counterinsurgency program,” said Cristina Palabay, secretary general of the human rights alliance Karapatan. In all cases, “the legal recourse for those arrested is difficult,” she said. “The courts [are] barely operating. There are no court hearings.”

In Negros, where police and military forces have arrested and killed members of farmers groups and land rights activists it accuses of being communist rebels, associates of one group have reported receiving frequent “visits” from the military during the island-wide lockdown. Felipe Levy Gelle, Jr., spokesperson of the peasants' rights group Paghidaet sa Kauswagan Development Group (PDG) Inc., said officers had gone through communities looking for him along with two other local peasant leaders. He accused a state-run radio program of earlier calling the three “organizers of the NPA.”

“If they find [you], it means daily visits at your house from morning until evening,” he said.

Gelle said out-of-work farmers in Negros have not received a promised 5,000-peso (\$98) government relief stipend and many families in rural areas have not been guaranteed continued food relief. The lockdown in Negros has confined people to their communities due to military-manned checkpoints, he said, but it has severed food supply chains and kept people from work while inspiring little confidence in authorities. “[There's a] strong fear the government cannot give them protection if ever they are sick,” he said.

Activist groups have been among the loudest critical voices of the Duterte administration, which has been slow to clarify and implement [financial relief](#) for vulnerable Filipinos, given weak justifications on limited testing availability, and been skewered on social media for “VIP” testing – despite the lack of access elsewhere in the country, politicians and their families have received tests, even while asymptomatic.

Several groups, including Karapatan, began a call this week to free political prisoners as attention

focuses on the country's overcrowded prisons, where the virus can easily be spread. The United Nations has [urged countries](#) to release prisoners, and several, from the United States to Iran, have done so. But this would likely be a last resort in the Philippines, where hundreds of curfew violators have been arrested and the country's deadly "drug war" [continues to rage on](#).

For the displaced residents of the demolished community in Manila, there is still no sign of help.

After the demolition, some residents were provided shelter by a local barangay (community) official while others, including children, were forced to live in the street, said Macario San Agustin, media liaison for Kadamay Metro Manila, an advocacy group for urban poor communities. "There have been no actions or any help from the local government unit," San Agustin said. One resident accused the local government of hindering the delivery of relief goods to displaced people and later claimed barangay officials had threatened to detain her for making a Facebook post about her situation.

"The government needs to stop demolitions, relocations, and evictions during this crisis," said Carlos Conde, Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch. Along with potentially contributing to the virus as they disperse, "they would potentially run into trouble with regulations relating to COVID-19, such as checkpoints and quarantine," he said.

"The government down to the barangay level needs to find ways to ensure that the homeless are taken care of, especially if they're asked to quarantine themselves," he said.

But government responses have thus far lacked not only in competence, but in compassion and dignity. Some groups, including Kadamay, have [organized and livestreamed](#) "protests at home." Elsewhere, frustrations have boiled over.

On Wednesday, residents of Sitio San Roque, an informal settlement, were [dispersed by police](#) and 21 people were arrested after a protest broke out near the community. Most residents of San Roque work in construction, factories, or other low-wage professions and cannot afford to miss a single paycheck. Before the lockdown, they said [they were worried](#) government relief programs would not reach them.

There were conflicting accounts of the protest, but the Save San Roque Alliance [sent Rappler an interview](#) with a resident, Bernadeth Cababoy, who said residents went to the area after hearing badly needed help would be given to them. Instead, they met the police.

"The men in uniform arrived," Cababoy said. "They hit the men. They have no pity."

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P.S.

• The Diplomat. April 03, 2020:
<https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-philippines-coronavirus-lockdown-is-becoming-a-crackdown/>

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