

**SUBMISSION  
TO THE 4<sup>th</sup> UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW  
OF THE PHILIPPINES, November 2022**

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IFI-RPRD, which began operating in 2010, is a Church-based human rights program for the cause of human rights, especially human rights defenders (HRDs). It is named after IFI Obispo Maximo (archbishop) Alberto Ramento, a bishop-HRD who was killed extrajudicially in 2006. In honor of Ramento and other church people whose human rights work and solidarity with the struggling people, it anchors its human rights commitments on Christian principles as well as universal and national human rights instruments. IFI-RPRD offers small grants for programs in human rights training and education, action and advocacy as well as a sanctuary and other forms of assistance.

## INTRODUCTION

1. This stakeholder's report is submitted by the Iglesia Filipina Independiente's Ramento Project for Rights Defenders (IFI-RPRD) for the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). IFI-RPRD has participated in the UPR since its second cycle in 2012.
2. In this submission, IFI-RPRD focuses on issues concerning the IFI – also known as the Philippine Independent Church – and its clergy and lay members from 2016 to 2021. IFI, is an indigenous, nationalist Catholic Church with memberships to the National Council of Churches in the Philippines,<sup>i</sup> the Christian Conference of Asia<sup>ii</sup> and the World Council of Churches.<sup>iii</sup>
3. The church's theology, steeped in liberation, has found the IFI expressing faith in ministries among marginalized sectors. In providing services to vulnerable populations and collaborating with civil society organizations, the IFI has grappled with difficulties in executing programs and human rights violations, among others. Specific cases will flesh these out.
4. This report generally discusses a recommendation during the third cycle: *"Take all necessary measures to promote the enjoyment of freedom of expression, religion and civil liberties"* (Botswana 133.70). This was merely noted by the government, but should be taken more seriously.
5. IFI-RPRD also notes the following salient points from the second to the current cycle:
  - The effort to mount counterinsurgency measures has been persistent throughout the recent presidencies. During the second and third cycles, we noted Operation Plans Bantay Laya and Bayanihan of the Arroyo and Aquino administrations, respectively. After President Rodrigo Duterte terminated the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), he institutionalized a counterinsurgency task force, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC).<sup>iv</sup> It has infamously exploited disinformation to stoke vitriol against the peace talks, as well as progressive individuals and groups. In connection to this, we reecho the recommendation to *"Stop the implementation of counterinsurgency programs that target human rights defenders and civilians"* (Slovakia 133.74, noted).
  - IFI-RPRD continues to see the slow delivery of justice, especially to victims of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances; and the Philippine government's legal offensive against activists and human rights defenders, including the filing of trumped-up charges. We thus cite the following recommendations during the third cycle of the UPR, all were merely noted by the government:
    - *administer justice and fair trial (Costa Rica 133.133, Timor Leste 133.131, Argentina 133.139, Slovenia 133.142, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 133.143, Liechtenstein 133.136, Zambia 133.151, Portugal 133.144, Sweden 133.145, United States of America 133.140);*
    - *provide adequate protection to human rights defenders (Hungary 133.176, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 133.182, Denmark 133.158, Norway*

133.179, Ukraine 133.181, France 133.153);

- *prohibit torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (Slovakia 133.105, Canada 133.108, Austria 133.123, Georgia 133.121);*
- *end extrajudicial killings (Lithuania 133.107, Australia 133.43, Ghana 133.111, Germany 133.109, Costa Rica 133.100, Chile 133.110, Switzerland 133.149, France 133.102) and, in connection to it, enforced disappearances (Poland 133.104, Norway 133.117, Sudan 133.101); and,*
- *address impunity (Luxembourg 133.141, Canada 133.157, Austria 133.148, Croatia 133.137, Iceland 133.153).*

## CASES

### ***Extrajudicial killings***

6. Extrajudicial killings have been a perennial problem, indicative of a deeply rooted culture of impunity in the Philippines. Extrajudicial killings violate the right to life.
7. What IFI-RPRD registered during the third cycle about such a system being exacerbated by sloppy and errant investigations into the abuses of authorities and the tolerance for vigilante-style actors holds true today. It did not help that the Duterte administration waged a war on drugs and against the communist rebellion, scoffing at human rights as he defended the actions of state forces.<sup>v</sup>
8. On Nov. 8, 2021, the IFI National Cathedral consecrated a Chapel of All IFI Martyrs, which honored IFI members who were martyred in extrajudicial killings, among whom Rev. Jeremias Aquino, Rev. Narciso Pico, Rev. William Tadena, Obispo Maximo Alberto Ramento, Benjamin Bayles, Meliton Catampongan, Erning Aykid, Salvador Romano. Some were felled in the period under review.
  - **Meliton Catampongan.** He was killed in Surigao del Norte in July 2017. He was a peasant leader and a member of the council of an IFI parish in his town. Before being shot, he had received death threats in the past.<sup>vi</sup>
  - **Erning Aykid.** He and another person were found dead on Sept. 15, 2017. He was a lay minister and respected community leader among the Mangyan in Oriental Mindoro. Aykid had received threats to his life.<sup>vii</sup>
  - **Briccio Nuevo Jr.** A motorcycle-riding gunman killed him in Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental, on May 4, 2021. He was a lay minister of the IFI parish there. He was earlier included in the hit list of vigilante group Kagubak.<sup>viii</sup>
9. Bigger policies can be cited for the grim fate the three shared. Catampongan was assassinated while Mindanao was under martial law (Proclamation No. 216). When Nuevo was killed, Memorandum Order No. 32 was already in effect, increasing military presence in Bicol and Eastern Visayas regions, as well as Negros Island. Aykid's case is one of many involving progressive indigenous peoples.
10. IFI-RPRD also notes that, aside from being IFI members, the above persons were also involved with civil society organizations.

### ***Threats, harassment, intimidation***

11. Strong presence in civil society is something that often gets IFI faithful in trouble among authorities.

12. Rev. Randy Manicap and Rev. Arvin Mangrubang, priests serving in the Diocese of Laoag in northern Philippines, reported surveillance and death threats as early as 2017.<sup>ix</sup> Both are members of People's Solidarity Against Large-Scale Mining in Ilocos Norte (PSALM-IN) and the Council of Leaders of Ilocos Network for Environment (DEFEND-Ilocos).
13. Rev. Marco Sulayao, a priest of the Diocese of Iloilo and chair of the Promotion of Church People's Response (PCPR) in Panay, was harassed as a checkpoint in Batad town.<sup>x</sup> He was also among the 42 arrested in Iloilo on May 2, 2020, after an effort to memorialize the death of a local activist.<sup>xi</sup>
14. On Jan. 31, 2019, Reverend Christopher Ablon and three others were surveilled by a motorcycle-riding tandem who were suspected to be monitoring the IFI National Cathedral.<sup>xii</sup> A month earlier, in 2018, Bishop Joselito Cruz, received a letter<sup>xiii</sup> that told him to not side with the Left.
15. Nationwide, churches have reported unannounced church visitations in the police's "Oplan Bathala" or the military's "Joint Campaign Plan Contentment." In Ilocos Sur, Rev. Ferdinand Lacanaria expressed dismay after soldiers probed him about the Ilocos Human Rights Alliance, to which he belongs.<sup>xiv</sup> In Marikina City, police officers would regularly attend church services of IFI-RPRD staff member Rev. Mary Grace Masegman, also co-chairperson at PCPR.
16. A form of harassment that has happened often in the Philippines is red-tagging or red-baiting. House Bill No. 9309 defines this as "the practice of publicly and detractively labeling, branding, naming, and accusing individuals and/or organizations in order to classify them as government-critical individuals and/or organizations who are state enemies, left-leaning, subversives, communist terrorists, and/or members of communist front organizations, with the purpose of overthrowing the democratically legitimized state authority."
17. In an open letter to President Duterte in early 2019, IFI bishops in Mindanao decried the (1) vandalism on IFI churches and highways in Zamboanga Peninsula<sup>xv</sup> and Northern Mindanao<sup>xvi</sup> regions noting that the IFI and other institutions like the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines (RMP) and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, (2) hit lists being distributed identifying Bishops Antonio Ablon and Felixberto Calang, as well as Reverends Christopher Ablon, Rolando Abejo and Khen Apus, among others, as members of CPP-NPA and (3) "active church lay leaders who now fear for their lives and security [and] ... are constantly under surveillance and are possible subject to warrantless arrest."<sup>xvii</sup>
18. NTF-ELCAC took its red-tagging efforts online when it launched a Facebook page in November 2019. Among others, in a May 2020 post, the agency called NCCP, IFI and UCCP, as well as PCPR and the Student Christian Movement of the Philippines (SCMP) "open sectoral organizations" of the communist rebellion. In the Philippines, many Facebook pages and accounts have also been mushrooming for the sole purpose of amplifying red-tagging posts or trolling individuals and institutions.
19. In November 2020, Obispo Maximo Rhee M. Timbang and 16 others were called "NPA terrorists" by tarpaulins posted in Mindanao's Caraga Region. The same poster has been widely circulated online.<sup>xviii</sup> That same month, Bro. Raffy Bayudan, an IFI seminarian, was red-tagged in posters seen in Urdaneta City, Pangasinan, the city where his seminary is located.<sup>xix</sup>

20. The poster red-tagging Bro. Bayudan carried quotes from Ka Eric Almendras, supposedly a “star witness” of the NTF-ELCAC, which the agency revealed a month prior. Ka Eric Almendras, real name Jeffrey Celiz, identifies as an ex-cadre of NPA. He named the IFI, UCCP, SCMP, the United Methodist Church and the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches as NPA recruiters.<sup>xx</sup>
21. Red-tagging is a complicated occurrence for four reasons. First, this can be done online and offline. Second, the same tactics can easily be reemployed across cases and contexts because they are easily replicable and difficult to trace. Third, there is no law punishing red-tagging. Finally, vilification can lead to extrajudicial killings and fabricated charges.

### ***Legal challenges***

22. IFI-RPRD raised alarm in past UPR submissions about how the Philippine government has used litigation to punish and intimidate activists and human rights defenders.
23. A clear proof of this is a perjury charge against IFI-RPRD staff member Rev. Wilfredo Ruazol and others, lodged by NTF-ELCAC vice chair Hermogenes Esperon Jr.<sup>xxi</sup> The IFI priest was charged together with Sisters Elenita Belardo, Emma Cupin and nine others supposedly for lying under oath. The perjury case was dropped for all but Sr. Belardo in December 2019, but was revived by a court in 2020. Hearings are ongoing.
24. An earlier case in Mindanao involves Bishop Carlo Morales of the IFI Diocese of Ozamiz. In May 2017, the two were charged with illegal possession of explosives. He was released on March 2018 after posting bail.<sup>xxii</sup> Proceedings are ongoing, previously encountering delays because the judge in charge of the case, Edmundo Pintac, was slain in October 2018.<sup>xxiii</sup>
25. In July 2018, police operatives arrested 13 people who were undertaking a consultation in General Santos City, Mindanao,<sup>xxiv</sup> with an arrest warrant in which none of them were named.<sup>xxv</sup> The group included at least two volunteers of the Visayas-Mindanao Regional Office for Development (VIMROD), IFI’s longest-running development project. One was Aldeem Yañez. He had been previously arrested and charged, along with another 554 people, of involvement in an NPA attack on an Army patrol base in 2018. He and 16 others were acquitted in late 2021.<sup>xxvi</sup>
26. In the Philippines, several church groups and other parties have expressed concerns about the independence and efficiency of the courts. A recent issue was based on a suspicion that state forces coopted courts or judges to act as “warrant factories,”<sup>xxvii</sup> indiscriminately approving warrants intended for red-tagged critics and activists.<sup>xxviii</sup> Some of the search warrants have resulted in violent encounters where the lives of activists have been lost, a number of which were quashed for being defective.<sup>xxix</sup> All these could constitute violations of the right to due process.
27. As a final note in this subsection, IFI-RPRD and other groups worry because of raids on the headquarters of progressive organizations<sup>xxx</sup> and the March 2021 order from the Anti-Money Laundering Council to freeze the bank accounts used by UCCP Haran, a known sanctuary provider to internally displaced Lumad or indigenous peoples in Mindanao.<sup>xxxi</sup>
28. If such measures become a normal response to suspicions that certain groups are funding or protecting terrorists, now more liberally defined under the Anti-Terror Act of 2020, many groups

providing services to populations in desperate need of help could be shut down, leading to the possible denial of life-saving aid during times of distress.

### ***Difficulties in humanitarian work***

29. The cases below specifically tackling humanitarian work reflect a reality magnified by the pandemic. Because of the lockdowns, there has been a greater need for humanitarian work in the Philippines. The demand has added to needs in areas torn by conflict and visited by natural calamities. Churches were among the first to reach communities, again with a deep sense of Christian accountability.
30. While the efforts were nonpartisan, direct services emanating from churches were among those politicized in various areas nationwide. Implementing humanitarian efforts has been more difficult for institutions and individuals who had previously been baselessly linked to the Left, such as IFI. Whilst providing assistance to communities, in the name of IFI-RPRD or otherwise, staff members have reported bureaucratic difficulties and graft.<sup>xxxii</sup>
31. In a joint statement in April 2021, a consortium of faith-based organizations in the Philippines released a statement<sup>xxxiii</sup> identifying multiple assaults on “humanitarian missions and prophetic ministries” amid the pandemic, some involving ordained members of IFI.<sup>xxxiv xxxv</sup>
32. While these instances became common during the pandemic, they are not new. IFI-RPRD staff were part an ecumenical mission in September 2017 that was supposed to provide relief goods to families displaced by aerial bombings in Batangas.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The contingent was tailed by police and later on blocked from visiting the evacuees and distributing aid.
33. IFI-RPRD steadfastly believes that humanitarian efforts, especially from organizations who have a track record proving adherence to humanitarian standards, should not face such difficulties. Ultimately, humanitarian assistance should not suffer delays because slowdowns could mean indignity or loss of life among beneficiaries.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

34. The cases in this report cover only the period under review and some cases relating to the IFI. Despite this, it is hoped that the cases — together with submissions from other stakeholders — will allow the UPR Working Group, UN member-states and other readers to understand the situation not only as numbers but as people.
35. The report ends with an enumeration of recommendations that IFI-RPRD hopes the Philippine government would support:
  - i. abolition of the NTF-ELCAC and the highly militarized “whole of nation” approach on
  - ii. resumption of principled peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines and with rebel groups in Mindanao.
  - iii. halt of red-tagging efforts and other state-sponsored disinformation campaigns undermining the primacy of human rights
  - iv. end of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and other measures used by state forces to trample human rights with impunity

- v. provide human rights victims, including victims of the war on drugs and human rights defenders, with the means to seek justice through judicious investigations and the prosecution of alleged perpetrators
- vi. uphold the Anti-Torture Law of 2009 and the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act of 2012; repeal the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020; and enact a law protecting Human Rights Defenders
- vii. invite UN special procedures and mandate holders, especially those with pending requests

<sup>i</sup> <https://nccphilippines.org/about-us/our-member-churches/#1491461187706-67f27d57-b3d4>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.cca.org.hk/member-churches/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/philippine-independent-church>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/nation/218667-duterte-creates-task-force-address-communist-armed-conflict-causes/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/breaking-news/2018/07/23/131083/rodrigo-duterte-human-rights-vs-human-lives-statement-draws-flak-sona2018/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://rprd.ph/statement-of-aktionsbundnis-menschenrechte-philippinen-denouncing-human-rights-violations-in-the-ifi/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://philtip.org/2020/09/14/slain-but-not-forgotten/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1431586/in-negros-justice-sought-for-slain-church-worker>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/filipino-priests-claim-army-death-threats-harassment/82814>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.karapatan.org/duterte+frees+criminals+and+murderers+while+arresting+and+harassing+activists>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/05/02/iloilo-42-released-on-bail/>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rhee.timbang/posts/2068580759846213>

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://rprd.ph/stop-harassment-of-church-people-allow-the-church-peaceful-observance-of-advent/>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-clergy-weary-of-soldiers-church-visits/85745#>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://manilastandard.net/lgu/mindanao/276889/iglesia-filipina-gets-red-tagged.html>

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rprdp/posts/292048784820052>

<sup>xvii</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rhee.timbang/posts/2144256555611966>

<sup>xviii</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/KA-Thribu-116903290220052/photos/122122889698092>

<sup>xix</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rhee.timbang/posts/3460835560620719>

<sup>xx</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=413456016478631>

<sup>xxi</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/nation/253340-esperon-perjury-charges-revived-activists/>

<sup>xxii</sup> <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1501841/cagayan-de-oro/local-news/ifi-bishop-arrested-with-alleged-rebel-out-on-bail>

<sup>xxiii</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/nation/213825-judge-edmundo-pintac-shot-dead-october-8-2018/>

<sup>xxiv</sup> <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1751351/cagayan-de-oro/local-news/13-northern-mindanao-activists-church-workers-arrested-in-general-santos-city>

<sup>xxv</sup> <https://www.bulatlat.com/2018/07/10/detained-church-workers-freed-bail/>

<sup>xxvi</sup> <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1523508/agusan-court-junks-charges-vs-17-activists#ixzz7MTnvU3qu>

<sup>xxvii</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/nation/manila-judges-search-warrants-calabarzon-crackdown-activists-march-2021/>

<sup>xxviii</sup> <https://mb.com.ph/2020/12/17/pba-airs-concern-over-courts-becoming-warrant-factories/>

<sup>xxix</sup> <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1477534/flawed-warrants-laid-bare-as-courts-side-with-law-in-freeing-activists>

<sup>xxx</sup> <https://www.rappler.com/nation/244288-progressive-groups-commission-human-rights-inspect-offices-fear-more-raids/>

<sup>xxxi</sup> <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1135146>

<sup>xxxii</sup> <http://rprd.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/covid5.pdf>

<sup>xxxiii</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/PhilippineFaithBasedOrganizations/posts/3880564038691185>

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ramento Project for Rights Defenders. (2021). *Human rights Report 2020*. Mandaluyong.

<sup>xxxv</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rhee.timbang/posts/2759551470749135>

<sup>xxxvi</sup> <https://nccphilippines.org/2017/10/04/nccp-gensec-deplores-humanitarian-blockage/>