**ICHRP-Canada’s “Free All Political Prisoners” Campaign**

**The Situation**

Both during and after the period of martial law in the Philippines (1972-1986, under former President Ferdinand Marcos), there has been an ongoing call for the release of all Philippine political prisoners by human rights defenders. This call comes both from organizations in the Philippines, and from the many global solidarity groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic this call has become more urgent than ever.

Political prisoners are victims of human rights violations, prisoners of conscience, and other activists and critics of the government. There are more than 600 political prisoners in the Philippines, with the number almost doubling during Rodrigo Duterte’s time as President since 2016 (see Prisons and Politics in the Philippines document). The vast majority of political prisoners are from the peasant sector, followed by Indigenous People, Moro (Muslim peoples from Mindanao), public employees, and human rights workers. These prisoners do not include the enormous numbers arrested under the drug war or COVID lockdown orders that target the urban poor.

Prisons in the Philippines are unimaginably overcrowded, with the prison system overall operating at 500% capacity. According to prison doctors, 20% of prisoners die yearly due to outbreaks of pulmonary tuberculosis. Of the political prisoners, more than 50 are elderly or ailing, with several others being pregnant or nursing newborns. These vulnerable prisoners include Ge-Ann Perez, a 20-year old woman afflicted with leprosy; Gerardo Dela Pena, an 80-year old farmer who was a prisoner under Marcos; Virginia Villamor, 68, who suffers from hypertension, and her husband Alberto, 65, who suffers from diabetes and is still recovering from a stroke in 2018; and dozens more.

These prisoners are all at acute risk due to overcrowding and the COVID-19 pandemic. We urgently call for the mass decongestion of prisons in the Philippines through releasing prisoners. In particular, we are calling for the prioritization of all elderly, sick, and pregnant/nursing political prisoners. This is not only morally justified, but will also benefit the public’s health, because prisons across the world have acted as incubators for the SARS-Cov-2 virus.

ICHRP-Canada urges the Philippine government to heed the call of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet: “Governments should release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners and others detained simply for expressing critical or dissenting views.”

**The Campaign**

ICHRP-Canada’s campaign “Free All Political Prisoners” is presently arranging for organizations to “adopt” or “sponsor” individuals or groups of political prisoners. This is a practical and effective way for organizations in Canada to support the struggle for human rights in the Philippines. By adopting/sponsoring a specific prisoner, organizations can engage in several forms of support for the release of the prisoner and the support of their families. These forms of support include:

1. **Educating** the wider public about the issue of political prisoners, generally and in the particular context of COVID-19.
2. **Mobilizing** moral, political, and material support from solidarity allies and progressive organizations within Canada for political prisoners in the Philippines.
   1. *Moral support* includes public statements of support for political prisoners generally, and for specific prisoners, based on various calls to action, as well as letters written to political prisoners to reassure them of outside awareness and support.
   2. *Political support* includes public letters to state officials in the Philippines and Canada, mobilizing progressive organizations within Canada, and forging sector-to-sector connections between Philippine and Canadian progressive organizations.
   3. *Material support* includes raising funds to meet the daily needs of political prisoners and their families; supporting livelihood programs for the families of political prisoners, to generate funds for self-reliance; financial support for human rights organizations in the Philippines, such as Kapatid and Karapatan; and raising legal defense funds in partnership with progressive legal organizations like the National Union of People’s Lawyers (NUPL).
3. **Building** a network of concerned organizations in Canadaby consolidating interested individuals into member organizations of the International Coalition on Human Rights in the Philippines - Canada (ICHRP-Canada), and establishing relationships with Philipine organizations supporting and advocating for political prisoners. These include organizations such as Kapatid - Families and Friends of Political Prisoners, as well as the sectoral organizations of the political prisoners (ex. KMU for trade unionists, or Anakbayan for youth/students).