François-Philippe Champagne

Minister of Foriegn Affairs

House of Commons

Ottawa ON

Canada K1A 0A6

**Re: Call to release all political prisoners**

Minister Champagne,

I am joining the call by human rights defenders, internationally and in the Philippines, for the release of political prisoners in the Philippines. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the congested jails in the Philippines (over 500% capacity), human rights defenders are specifically calling for the immediate release of political prisoners who are elderly, ill, or pregnant.

The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has raised concerns regarding political prisoners in her report on the human rights situation in the Philippines, highlighting the intimidation of civil society groups by police and military through trumped-up charges such as illegal possession of firearms/explosives. Bachelet has called on governments to “release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners and others detained simply for expressing critical or dissenting views.”

The majority of political prisoners have yet to undergo trial, making them innocent under both the Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, as well as international law. This includes activists who have been arrested on trumped-up charges and consultants for the ongoing peace process, whose arrests violate the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG).

The current situation in the Philippines presents a compelling case for Canada to act. Canada can influence the political situation in the Philippines through multiple channels, including acting on the recommendations in the *Voices at Risk* toolbox.

Support could take the form of a public statement expressing Canada’s support for the recommendations in Bachelet's report, offering to visit imprisoned human rights defenders, and attending their trials where possible. In light of the recent killings of former political prisoners like Randy Echanis and Zara Alvarez, Global Affairs Canada can make a real difference by reaching out to the families of political prisoners to determine their needs for assistance and protection. This could be done through support groups for political prisoners’ relatives, such as Kapatid.

We urge you to do everything in your power to facilitate the immediate release of political prisoners, amplify this call, and uphold their right to health and safety.

Warm regards,

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Cc.

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