



## NEWS RELEASE

November 10, 2017

### *Human rights defenders condemn fascism of 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Ilocos and Cordillera*

ILOCOS SUR - Members of people's organizations from the Cordillera and Ilocos regions held a protest action today at the public market of Sta. Cruz town in Ilocos Sur to condemn the political persecution perpetrated by the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the AFP against activists and human rights defenders in the said regions. These include the trumped-up charges filed against five women human rights defenders by the 81<sup>st</sup> Infantry Battalion and the 71<sup>st</sup> DRC, and the grave threats and harassment committed by the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion Wildcats against members of KASTAN-CPA Abra.

“State fascism heightened this year, not just with harsh words but also with harsh attacks on people's rights through the implementation of *Oplan Kapayapaan*. The people's taxes are used to subdue legitimate people's dissent and protect the interests of the ruling classes rather than deliver the much-needed services to the people such as land, livelihood, health and education,” said Cordillera Peoples Alliance Chairperson Windel Bolinget.

The five women human rights defenders in the Cordillera facing trumped-up charges are Sarah Abellon-Alikes (KADUAMI-Regional Development Center and pioneer of CPA), Rachel Mariano (Community Health, Education, Services and Training in the Cordillera Region), Sherry Mae Soledad (KADUAMI-RDC), Joanne Villanueva (Cordillera Women's Education, Action, Research Center) and Asia Isabella Gepte (convenor of Binnadang and a staff of the joint secretariat of the NDFP nominated section to the Joint Monitoring Committee on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law). All of them are working to support marginalized communities, two have young children, and one recently gave birth to her first child.

The so-called “Palparan Battalion” or the 24<sup>th</sup> IBPA Wildcats consistently maligned members of KASTAN and members of the clergy, including Bishop Sergio Utleg as “enemies of the state” and connected with the New Peoples Army. KASTAN Secretariat Shirley Ann Angiwot and Teresa Forag were subjected to grave threats and harassment by accusing them of kidnapping minors. Mudiit People's Organization leaders were also subjected to illegal searches of their homes. The 24<sup>th</sup> IBPA is responsible for the indiscriminate airstrikes in Malibcong, Abra last March after Pres. Duterte ordered the AFP to “flatten the hills”.

Reports from the Ilocos Human Rights Advocates (IHRA) and Cordillera Human Rights Alliance (CHRA) state that militarisation is heightened in areas where the 7<sup>th</sup> ID operates. Community leaders including elected LGU officials are threatened, harassed and intimidated, if not coopted by the army forces. Illegal arrests are committed against peasant leaders in Ilocos, including a minor in Abra. The 7<sup>th</sup> ID elements have also been conducting public disinformation campaigns in schools and communities through forums and social media posts.

The 81<sup>st</sup> IBPA is responsible for 225 cases of human rights violations which had victimized 840 individuals and 9000 families in the Ilocos Region. Most of the victims are leaders, members and allies of peoples organizations such as the Solidarity of Peasants Against Exploitation (STOP Exploitation), Ilocos Human Rights Alliance (IHRA), Anakbayan and Ilocos Network for the Environment (DEFEND Ilocos).

These same army units are responsible for the recent harassment on leaders and members of the Save Quirino Movement (SQM), a people's organization in Quirino, Ilocos Sur which actively campaigns against destructive mining operations of Lepanto and entry of new mining explorations. CPA Chairperson Windel Bolinget, Vice-Chairperson Xavier Akien, and Center for Development Programs in the Cordillera (CDPC) staff members were also illegally detained at San Emilio after attending an SQM meeting in Quirino last October 27.

Government's resurrection of the Inter-Agency Legal Action Group (IALAG) through the Inter-Agency Committee on Legal Action (IACLA) uses the Philippine justice system against legitimate political dissent through the filing of trumped-up charges to threaten, harass, intimidate and “neutralize” persons whom they deem as “enemies of the state” including political activists and government critics.

“The 7<sup>th</sup> ID's attacks on the people, human rights defenders and development activists has deprived poor farmers and indigenous peoples in neglected communities of the basic social services that people's organizations have been able to provide. The government should heed the lessons of the past – that oppression only breeds resistance. Our people has a proud history of toppling tyrants and we can do it again,” Bolinget ended. \*\*\*

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