

Duterte militarises the “war on drugs” in the Philippines

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte earlier this month ordered the suspension of police involvement in his brutal “war on drugs” that has left thousands dead throughout the country. All units of the Anti-Illegal Drug Group of the Philippine National Police (PNP) were ordered dissolved and the PNP’s Operation Tokhang (Knock and Plead), a campaign of house visits and intimidation of those accused of illegal drug activity, was put on hold.

The pullback of the police by no means indicates the end of Duterte’s “war.” It portends an even greater escalation. Vowing to continue the offensive until the end of his term, Duterte called on the military to take the front line. This will widen and deepen the violence being inflicted on the working class and the poor.

Duterte is not only militarising his war on the poor, conducted on the pretext of the anti-drug crusade. He has also moved to resurrect the hated Philippine Constabulary, the military apparatus of domestic repression, created by the United States during its colonial rule in the country and used by former President Ferdinand Marcos to implement martial law.

Duterte is proposing to make this section of the military responsible for continuing the program of state-sanctioned vigilante killings. This is a marked development in Duterte’s own rapid drive toward dictatorial power and direct military rule.

The sidelining of the Philippine police followed the exposure last month of police involvement in the abduction and murder of Jee Ick Joo, a South Korean businessman. Jee was seized last October from his home in Angeles city, two hours from Manila, the country’s capital, by a PNP Anti-Illegal Drug Group unit under the guise of an anti-illegal drug operation.

On the same day, Jee was brought to Camp Crame, the PNP national headquarters, where he was strangled.

The unit demanded and received \$US100,000 in ransom for the by-then deceased Jee, and then, even more brazenly, demanded an additional ransom of nearly \$100,000 more.

Three other South Koreans have since come forward claiming that they have also been accused of illegal drug activity by police, detained, beaten up and forced to cough up large sums of money for their release.

The toll of the war on drugs has been horrendous. Since Duterte’s assumption of office, 7,080 people have been killed—of that number, 2,555 by the police and 4,525 by death squads. Underscoring the intimate connection between the police and the death squads, following Duterte’s orders, extrajudicial killings dropped sharply, from over 30 deaths a day to one a day.

On January 31, Amnesty International released a report on its latest investigation into the killings. Entitled, “If you are poor you are killed”: Extrajudicial Executions in the Philippines’ ‘War on Drugs,’” the report states:

“Police officers routinely bust down doors in the middle of the night and then kill in cold blood unarmed people suspected of using or selling drugs. In several cases documented by Amnesty International, witnesses described alleged drug offenders yelling they would surrender, at times while on their knees or in another compliant position.

“They were still gunned down. To cover their tracks, police officers appear often to plant ‘evidence’ and falsify incident reports.”

According to the report, the killings have engendered an “economy of death,” where the police and the death squads are provided financial incentives for each death. It states:

“A police officer with more than a decade of

experience on the force, and who currently conducts operations as part of an anti-illegal drugs unit in Metro Manila, told Amnesty International that there are significant under-the-table payments for ‘encounters’ in which alleged drug offenders are killed.”

This source said the police are “paid by the encounter ...The amount ranges from 8,000 pesos (\$US161) to 15,000 pesos (\$302) ... That amount is per head. So if the operation is against four people, that’s 32,000 pesos (\$644) ... We’re paid in cash, secretly, by headquarters ...There’s no incentive for arresting. We’re not paid anything.”

In addition, Amnesty International recounts strong evidence of state authorities paying off assassins to carry out drug-related killings. “Two individuals paid to kill alleged drug offenders told Amnesty International that their boss is an active duty police officer; they reported receiving around 10,000 pesos (\$201) per killing.”

The Amnesty report points to the class character of the war on drugs. Those killed “are overwhelmingly from the urban poor. Many were unemployed and lived in informal settlements or squatter communities.

“The killings mean further misery for already impoverished families, at times compounded by police officers stealing from them during crime scene investigations. A woman whose husband was killed said the police took goods she sold on commission, money she set aside for the electric bill, and even new shoes she bought for her child.”

The targeting of the poor is no accident. Intensifying inequality is fuelling deep social tensions and unrest, with brutal repression the only answer of the Filipino ruling class.

The more than a decade of economic growth recorded for the Philippines has been built on the backs of the working class and the poor. In 2014, out of a population of 100 million, 50 people held over \$74.2 billion in assets, equivalent to 25.7 percent of the 2014 gross domestic product. Their wealth increased \$8.45 billion from the previous year, cornering 51 percent of economic growth for 2014.

This obscene level of wealth is a product of the export of cheap labour around the world and the brutal exploitation of even cheaper labour locally. Over 2.4 million workers are abroad as overseas contract workers, joining more than 8 million Filipino economic

migrants. These overseas Filipinos, enduring long hours, low wages and few chances to visit family, sent back \$29.1 billion last year.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the minimum daily wage in Manila is barely \$10 and in the provinces, as low as \$5 a day.

While huge wealth is being accumulated at one end of the social scale, more than 26 million people are living below the poverty threshold of a monthly income of \$184. Of these, more than 12 million people are living in extreme poverty on less than \$128 a month and could not even meet their basic food needs.

Amid growing social inequality and massive poverty, the Philippine ruling class is preparing to use the state apparatus and associated vigilantes to intimidate and suppress any opposition by the working class and the poor. That is the significance of Duterte’s anti-drug war and his assumption of increasingly draconian powers.



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