His Excellency Peter MacArthur

Canadian Ambassador to the Republic of the Philippines

P.O. Box 216, Makati Central Post Office

Manila, Philippines 1261

Via email: peter.macarthur@international.gc.ca

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

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, human rights defenders are 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. The report highlights intimidation of civil society groups by police and military through charges of illegal possession of firearms, or of perjury when such groups seek temporary protection orders against government agencies or officials. 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, which according both to the Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, as well as international law, makes them innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. This includes activists who have been arrested on trumped-up charges and Peace Consultants, whose arrests violate the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees.

The current situation in the Philippines offers a compelling case for Canada to act. I believe Canada can influence the political situation in the Philippines through multiple channels. I am asking you to support political prisoners in the Philippines by acting on the recommendations in the *Voices at Risk* toolbox.

This 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, the Canadian Embassy can make a real difference by reaching out to the families of political prisoners to determine their need for assistance and protection. This could be done through support groups for political prisoners’ relatives, such as Kapatid.

Mr. Ambassador, 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.

The Honourable François-Philippe Champagne P.C, M.P., Minister of Foreign Affairs.

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