

Philippines: 'Drug War' Killings Rise During Pandemic

Upsurge in Attacks on Activists, Community Leaders, Rights Defenders

By [Human Rights Watch](#)

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The [Philippine](#) government's "drug war" killings intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, as did unnecessary arrests during lockdowns, Human Rights Watch said today in its [World Report 2021](#). Attacks by the police, military, and unidentified gunmen on leftist activists, community and Indigenous leaders, human rights defenders, and journalists also increased during the year.

"The Duterte administration appeared to take advantage of Covid-19 curfews in 2020 to expand its gruesome and bloody 'war on drugs,'" said [Phil Robertson](#), deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "At the same time, government 'red-baiting' of leftist activists, rights defenders, and others have put them at greater risk of deadly attack."

In the 761-page *World Report 2021*, its 31st edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in more than 100 countries. In his [introductory essay](#), Executive Director [Kenneth Roth](#) argues that the incoming United States administration should embed respect for human rights in its domestic and foreign policy, in a way that is more likely to survive future US administrations that might be less committed to human rights. Roth emphasizes that even as the Trump administration mostly abandoned the protection of human rights, other governments stepped forward to champion rights. The Biden administration should seek to join, not supplant, this new collective effort.

The rights situation in the Philippines worsened during the pandemic, as the government imposed strict lockdown measures that resulted in the arrest and incarceration of tens of thousands of Filipinos, in conditions that greatly increased their health risk. In the early days of the lockdown, police subjected curfew violators – including children – to abusive treatment.

["Drug war" killings](#) in the Philippines in 2020 increased by more than 50 percent during the early months of the pandemic. The police reported in November that since Rodrigo Duterte became president, nearly 8,000 alleged drug suspects had been killed during police operations. In June, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights validated many of these killings. Domestic human rights groups and the governmental Commission on Human Rights believe the actual toll is triple that figure.

Philippine rights monitors reported in 2020 that more than 160 political activists had been

killed since Duterte became president in 2016. A number of the victims had earlier been “red-tagged” or red-baited by the Philippine military, the police, and local anti-communist groups. Among those targeted for “red-tagging” were celebrities who expressed support for groups that the government [accused](#) of having communist links.

The media also came under renewed attack. In June, a court convicted Maria Ressa, prominent head of the news website Rappler, on politically motivated charges of cyber libel stemming from Rappler’s persistent reporting on the “drug war.” In July, the Duterte-controlled Philippine Congress voted not to extend the franchise of ABS-CBN, the country’s largest television network, which had often criticized the government’s “drug war,” forcing the network’s closure.

“As respect for human rights in the Philippines spirals downwards, concerned governments, and UN agencies will need to press the Duterte government harder to halt its atrocities and hold those responsible to account,” Robertson said.

Read full HRW report [here](#).

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*Featured image: Protest by local human rights groups, remembering the victims of the drug war, October 2019.
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