

UA 116/21

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PHILIPPINES FEARS OF TORTURE FOR ABDUCTED ACTIVIST

Steve Abua, a land rights activist and community organizer of farmers and Indigenous Peoples, has been missing since he was abducted on 6 November 2021 in Central Luzon. Steve's wife said his alleged abductors called her and asked her to convince her husband to admit that he is a member of an armed group, a tactic often used by Philippine authorities to silence human rights defenders and dissidents. The police and the military should exhaust all means possible to find Steve, ensure his safety and reunite him with his family.

Write to the Commander of the Northern Luzon Command urging him in line with his duties and obligations to:

- Employ all means at your disposal to urgently locate Steve, guarantee his safety, and safely reunite him with his family
- Investigate the circumstances of his abduction, and bring anyone suspected of criminal responsibility to account in fair trials
- If he is in state custody, disclose his whereabouts immediately and release him unless he is charged with a recognizable offense, under international standards. Pending his release, ensure he is treated in line with international standards
- Ensure the protection and promotion of the human rights of all people, including human rights defenders and activists who often bear the brunt of violations

Write to:

Lt. Gen. Arnulfo Marcelo Burgos Jr.
Commander, Northern Luzon Command, Armed Forces of the Philippines
Camp Servillano Aquino,
Tarlac City, Tarlac
Philippines
Salutation: Dear Lt. Gen. Burgos

And copy:

His Excellency Rodolfo Robles
Ambassador
Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines
30 Murray Street
Ottawa, ON K1N 5M4
Phone: 613-233-1121 or 24hrs 614-2846
Fax: 613-233-4165
Email: embassyofphilippines@rogers.com

Additional Information:

Steve Abua is a long-time community organizer of farmers, farm workers and Indigenous Peoples under the group Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas. Prior to this role, Steve was a student activist and leader, graduating with honours from the University of the Philippines.

Steve Abua was last seen on 6 November 2021 in Lubao town in Pampanga, on his way to a meeting in Bataan according to his wife Johanna. It is believed that he was forcibly taken by unidentified perpetrators, either at a transport terminal in Pampanga province or in Dinalupihan town in Bataan.

On the same day of his abduction, Johanna received messages from Steve's phone believed to be from his abductors, including photos of Steve. She was then shown a video of Steve wearing a white shirt and jeans, blindfolded and hands tied, and with his mouth stuffed with a cloth. The abductors, who did not identify themselves or the group they belong to, reportedly told Johanna in subsequent calls to convince Steve to admit to being a member of the New People's Army, which Johanna said he is not, and asked her to meet with them and bring along their child, which she refused to do. The abductors also told Johanna not to tell anyone about Steve's situations or they would kill him, while also saying that the government was only giving Steve a chance to "change his ways". Both the police and the military in the region denied arresting, detaining or holding Steve captive.

The phenomenon of red-tagging – or the linking of activists and human rights defenders to armed groups, by both the government and unknown individuals – has been happening for decades now but has intensified under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, following the breakdown of peace talks between the government and the Communist Party of the Philippines in 2017. Duterte's subsequent Executive Order (EO) 70 provides for a "Whole-of-Nation approach in defeating the Local Communist Terrorist Groups" and led to the creation of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict. Observers point to this pivotal moment as the beginning of a renewed campaign of red-tagging, threats and harassment against human rights defenders, political activists, lawyers, trade unionists and other targeted groups perceived to be affiliated with the progressive left.

Many groups, including Amnesty International and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, have [called](#) for the immediate end to this approach, expressing concern that the government's dangerously broad counter-insurgency strategy has led to an increase in human rights violations against human rights defenders and political activists across the country.