



National Council of Churches in Australia

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from the National Council of Churches in Australia

Arrest and Alleged Torture of 43 Health Workers in the Philippines Prompts Calls from Churches for Justice

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) expresses extreme concern over the arrest, continued detention and alleged torture of 43 health workers in the Philippines on Friday, February 6, including Dr. Alexis Montes a former commission member of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) and former health program coordinator of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP).

Reports say that more than 300 military and police raided a health training session at Dr. Melecia Velmonte's retreat center and held the participants at gunpoint before even searching the premises.

Since their arrest, the health workers have been denied visits of relatives and friends. The Commission for Human Rights Chair Leila de Lima said, "They are continuously handcuffed and blindfolded, they are not allowed to sleep, they are not allowed to feed themselves. Even when they use the bathroom, someone else is there to take off their underwear."

Ms Lima said that Dr. Alex Montes, whom the military has accused of being a member of the New People's Army (NPA), was electrocuted and repeatedly hit on the chest while being questioned. This accusation clashes with Dr. Montes admirable humanitarian record, including the development of UCCP hospitals, his dedication to the NCCP and his passion providing health services to the underprivileged.

The Revd Rex RB Reyes, JR. General Secretary of NCCP said, "This latest assault on human rights is a manifestation of a dysfunctional system claiming democracy yet denying basic rights to its citizens. It is a system where warlords are entitled their rights if not coddled by the powers that be while members of NGOs and people's organizations are not. It is a system where those who cause people's pain are allowed their maximum day in court and are even set free while those who ease the people's pain are labelled members of the NPA, leftists, communists, ad infinitum, arrested and tortured then denied any right, constitutional or otherwise.

"There can be no better ingredient for more social and political dissent than the brazen affront to human dignity like, illegal arrests and detention, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. With a dwindling budget for health, the least the government could do is to support non-government initiatives whose leaders and constituents, more often than not, represent the ideals of genuine community service and Christian selflessness."

The Revd Tara Curlewis, General Secretary of the NCCA said, "The NCCA supports the NCCP in their call to release all 43 health workers from detention. We are deeply concerned at reports of torture, both physical and emotional, and that workers have been subjected to sleep deprivation. These patterns of systematic human rights abuses and continued mistrust for the church in the Philippines are of great concern. We support the NCCP statement to the Philippines government to strengthen NGO health initiatives rather than undermine community service and Christian selflessness."

For further comment or to arrange an interview with the Revd Rex RB Reyes, JR. General Secretary of NCCP: Alistair Gee 0417 672 650

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Antiochian Orthodox Church

Armenian Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church of the East

Chinese Methodist Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational Federation

Coptic Orthodox Church

Greek Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Roman Catholic Church

Romanian Orthodox Church

Salvation Army

Syrian Orthodox Church

Uniting Church

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