

URGENT ACTION

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.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Lt. Gen. Arnulfo Marcelo Burgos Jr.

Commander, Northern Luzon Command, Armed Forces of the Philippines
Camp Servillano Aquino,
Tarlac City, Tarlac
Philippines

Dear Lt. Gen. Burgos:

I am writing to express alarm over the abduction of activist and land rights defender **Steve Abua**, who has been missing since 6 November. According to his wife, Johanna, Steve was on his way to a meeting when he was forcibly taken by unidentified perpetrators either in Pampanga or in Bataan, both in Central Luzon which falls under your jurisdiction.

It is distressing to learn that during a call with the abductors, Johanna was showed a video of Steve blindfolded, with his hands tied and mouth stuffed with a cloth. The abductors asked Johanna to convince Steve to admit he is a member of the armed group New People's Army (NPA), which he is not according to Johanna. They also asked Johanna to meet with them along with their young daughter, which she refused to do. There is reason to believe the abductors may be connected with the government, as Johanna said they talked about the government giving Steve a chance to "change his ways".

I find the phenomenon of red-tagging in the Philippines incredibly alarming. Despite repeated commitments to respecting, protecting and promoting human rights, the government continues to falsely accuse activists and human rights defenders of being NPA members. Accusations that in fact increase attacks, including killings, against these individuals.

Steve's disappearance, which puts him at greater risk of torture and other ill-treatment, as well as the harassment of his family, paint an alarming picture of the state of human rights in the Philippines.

Therefore, in line with your duties and obligations, I call on you 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 Steve's 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.**

Yours sincerely,

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.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 16 January 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Steve Abua (he/him)