

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

1 February 2023

ASA 35/6412/2023

# PHILIPPINES: ENSURE THOROUGH, INDEPENDENT AND IMPARTIAL INVESTIGATION INTO JOURNALIST'S KILLING

Amnesty International reiterates its calls for a thorough, effective, independent and impartial investigation into the killing of high-profile radio journalist Percy Lapid, which is still at the preliminary phase four months after he was killed. The organization urges the Philippine authorities to ensure that the investigation is conducted with total adherence to international standards, to examine thoroughly how the killing may have been in connection to his work as a journalist and to investigate all those responsible, including those who ordered Lapid's killing. The organization also calls on foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations to continue monitoring the development of the investigation to ensure all those responsible are brought to justice in fair trials.

Lapid, whose real name is Percy Mabasa, was shot dead by unknown individuals on 3 October 2022 in Las Piñas City, near the capital Manila. His radio show, "Lapid Fire", was known for being highly critical of government officials, including former President Duterte and current President Marcos Jr. His show also revealed allegations of corruption against suspended Bureau of Corrections Director General Gerald Bantag, who is one of the main suspects identified by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to be behind Lapid's killing. Lapid's family has directly linked the killing to Lapid's reputation for his sharp-tongued commentary as a prominent broadcaster.

The National Bureau of Investigation under the DOJ opened a probe a day after Lapid's killing. On 17 October 2022, Joel Escorial, who claimed to be the person who carried out the killing, allegedly surrendered to the authorities and confessed that he had received orders to kill Lapid. Escorial also identified Crisanto Villamor Jr as the middleman from whom he received the orders, supposedly coming from Bantag. Villamor reportedly died a day after Escorial's surrender, inside the New Bilibid Prison where he was already serving a prison term under the registered name of Jun Villamor. A subsequent autopsy by independent forensic expert Dr Raquel Fortun concluded that Villamor's death was a case of homicide by suffocation with a plastic bag, but an official investigation by the authorities is ongoing.

On 21 October 2022, Bantag was suspended while the authorities investigated the deaths of Villamor and Lapid. Since then, the DOJ has filed murder complaints against Bantag and several others, including his deputy, Ricardo Zulueta, for the death of Lapid. The authorities have also filed complaints against both men and several others for the death of Villamor. Both Bantag and Zulueta have denied their involvement and remain free while prosecutors assess whether there is enough evidence to bring charges against them. Bantag, in turn, has accused Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla of killing Lapid, filing his own complaints of murder, libel and graft against him. He had also filed a motion for the investigation to be transferred from the DOJ to the Office of the Ombudsman, citing Remulla's alleged "bias" against him. At the fourth preliminary hearing on 31 January, the DOJ dismissed Bantag's motion for reconsideration and set another hearing date.

Amnesty International is concerned by the circumstances surrounding the investigation of Lapid's murder, including the killing of Villamor in state custody, who could have provided crucial information. Many unanswered questions arising from the investigation remain, including who ordered the killing of Lapid and whether there were other higher-ranking government officials involved.

Amnesty International urges the Philippine government to take all appropriate measures to ensure that the investigations into the killing of Lapid and Villamor are prompt, thorough, independent and impartial in order to determine the truth and create trust from the Philippine public and the international community in the probe. All those responsible for or otherwise involved in these killings, including those who ordered them, should be brought to justice in fair trials if there is enough evidence against them.

Given the Philippines' poor record on the protection of suspects and witnesses, including following the death of Villamor, the government must also ensure that adequate measures are in place for the safety and security of all suspects and witnesses in the case. Moreover, the authorities must also ensure the safety of Lapid's family, who have claimed to have been receiving death threats after calling for the perpetrators to be brought to justice.

Amnesty International also calls on the international community to monitor the development of this emblematic investigation and to raise this case in all bilateral and multilateral engagements with the Philippine government, to ensure

the investigations into the deaths of Lapid and Villamor are carried out with complete adherence to international standards, and to ultimately address the ongoing climate of impunity for killings of journalists in the country.

## **Background**

According to the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), Percy Lapid was the second journalist killed since the beginning of the administration of President Marcos Jr. The first was radio broadcaster Rey Blanco, who was stabbed to death on 18 September 2022 in Mabinay, Negros Oriental province.

The Philippines continues to be one of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists, currently ranked 147 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom index. The year 2022 marked the fifth consecutive year that the country's ranking dropped. Rarely have killings of journalists resulted in arrests, let alone prosecutions, leading to a climate of impunity with few perpetrators ever brought to justice that is having a chilling effect on the right to media freedom and freedom of expression.

In 2022, other attacks on the right to freedom of expression and against the media in the Philippines persisted. Journalists and human rights defenders were convicted for cyber libel and were "red-tagged" after being accused of links to the communist armed insurgency, which has led to increased attacks and killings against them.