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## HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

### ISSUE

Serious human rights violations still occur in the Philippines although the frequency of violations continues to decrease, following the trend of the past few years. The national elections on May 11, 1992, which were among the freest and fairest in the Filipino history, marked a significant step forward in democratic development and augur well for further improvements in the human rights situation and good governance.

### BACKGROUND

The generally free and fair national elections of May 11, 1992, followed by a peaceful and democratic transfer of power from President Aquino to the Ramos administration, were key steps in the restoration of democracy in the Philippines in wake of the 1972-86 Marcos dictatorship. President Ramos has proposed concrete steps towards a national reconciliation and ending of insurgency and instability, which are principal factors behind the continuing though declining level of human rights violations in the Philippines. These include: a) legalization of the Communist Party of Philippines (CPP); b) amnesty for political detainees; c) repeal of a law which made possession of firearms in furtherance of rebellion a crime (this law was frequently used -- and misused -- to convict suspected communists, Muslim radicals and military rebels); d) establishment of a new Presidential Anti-Crime Commission (PACC), chaired by Filipino Vice-President Estrada to fight crime; e) negotiations with the National Democratic Front (NDF) under the auspices of the National Unification Commission (NUC). On September 1, 1992, a joint declaration was signed, calling for formal "no pre-condition" peace negotiations and measures of goodwill and confidence-building to create a favourable climate for these negotiations. Since then, the two sides have failed to reach agreement on a venue for formal peace negotiations.

However, the persistence of widespread economic hardship, with approximately 55 percent living below the poverty line while a small wealthy elite controls national wealth, still breeds discontent and provides a fertile ground for serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, torture and mass exodus, although the trend is downward. A majority of these violations are still perpetrated by military, citizens armed forces geographical units (CAFGUS) and police in the course of counter-insurgency operations. Thousands of civilians are evacuated annually from villages suspected of harbouring, or being sympathetic to the CPP/NPA. In the course of evacuations some, especially children, die from malnutrition or disease when seeking shelter in overcrowded evacuation centres or retreating into forests and mountains. In addition, CPP/NPA also continue to commit human rights violations of various kinds.

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