Resolution on the human rights situation in the Philippines

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The European Parliament adopted a joint resolution on the human rights situation in the Philippines, where, in recent years the number of politically motivated killings in the Philippines has dramatically risen and the human rights situation in the country gives reason for serious concern. The resolution, adopted by 68 votes to 0 with 0 abstentions, pointed out that the local human rights organisation Karapatan has recorded 180 forced disappearances and over 800 killings, most of them by unidentified gunmen, since 2001. Most of those killed, such as opposition party members, church people, community leaders, peasants, journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, trade unionists or simply witnesses of extra-judicial killings, have been accused by government representatives of being members of front organisations for illegal armed groups and 'terrorists'. Both the findings of the Melo Commission, appointed by President Arroyo and the results of the investigations by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions indicate the involvement of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in those political killings. In a positive development, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has appointed a high-level independent commission to examine the problem and a national-level police task force to investigate the killings. The commission's findings indicate army involvement in the political killings. In response to its recommendations, President Arroyo has issued a 6-point plan to stop the killings. However, MEPs believe all this is far from enough.

Parliament expressed its grave concern at the increasing number of political killings and urged the Philippine authorities to make the necessary investigations in a timely, thorough and transparent manner and to bring those responsible to justice. It condemned in the strongest terms the murder of Mrs Siche Bustamante-Gandinao, a dedicated human rights activist who was killed just days after testifying to the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. The Human Security Act 2007, which will enter into force in July 2007, is liable to further increase the incidence of human rights violations by the Security Forces because it will allow arrest without warrant and arbitrary detention for up to three days. Parliament called upon the Government of the Philippines to introduce concrete protection measures to avoid human rights abuses that could result from the application of this law.

It denounced attacks on legal opposition groups, and called on the authorities to put an end to allegations of collusion between peaceful opposition groups and illegal armed groups. The Philippine Government must adopt measures to end the systematic intimidation and harassment of witnesses in connection with prosecutions for killings and ensure truly effective witness protection. Parliament called particularly on the Philippine Ombudsman to take seriously his constitutional role in responding to extrajudicial killings attributed to public officials.

Whilst the 6-point plan of the Government to end the political killings was viewed positively, Parliament stressed that the Government of the Philippines must show real commitment to investigating those killings and a readiness to bring those responsible for them, including representatives of the security forces, to justice. So far most police investigations have tended to be flawed. The climate of impunity has a corrosive impact on public confidence in the rule of law. Parliament was concerned that the killings are creating a climate in which people in the Philippines do not feel free to exercise their rights of political expression and association.

Lastly, Parliament called on the Government of the Philippines to guarantee the security of those applying for the redistribution of land under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Programme (CARP) and to expedite the implementation of the land reform programme in order to curb one of the root causes of political violence.