

International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances – 30 August 2020

UN Human Rights Office for South-East Asia

BANGKOK (30 August 2020) – Expressing profound concern over reports of enforced disappearances that have continued in a number of countries across South-East Asia, the UN Human Rights Office is urgently calling on States in the region to criminalize this egregious act and to prioritize ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

“The time has come to end these heinous crimes in South-East Asia. Strong commitments are needed by States to achieve that goal through adopting domestic legislation that meets international norms and standards and by fully implementing the Convention, including establishing appropriate domestic institutional mechanisms to investigate allegations of disappearances,” Cynthia Veliko, Regional Representative of the UN Human Rights Office in Bangkok, said in a statement marking the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances.

Only one country in South-East Asia – Cambodia – has ratified the International Convention, and three other nations – Indonesia, Lao PDR and Thailand – are signatories but have yet to become States Parties.

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, which is mandated to assist families in determining the fate or whereabouts of victims, has documented at least 1,301 cases that remain unresolved in South-East Asia. Almost half of those cases are from the Philippines. In the past three years, cases of enforced disappearances have been reported in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. Indonesia is also dealing with a historical legacy of disappearances, including those committed in Timor-Leste.

“Enforced disappearance is one of the worst possible human rights violations that can be committed, robbing families of the knowledge, often forever, of the fate of their loved ones,” Veliko said. “Families have the right to know and it is the responsibility of every Government to urgently resolve these cases, to put in place mechanisms to prevent it from occurring, and to fulfil their obligations under international human rights law.”

The Convention defines enforced disappearance as an ‘arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law’. The Convention provides that no one shall be subject to such an action without exception, even in times of war, and provides that it constitutes a crime against humanity when practiced in a widespread or systematic matter.

In South-East Asia, individuals have been targeted for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Victims have included human rights defenders, environmental and political activists, government critics, lawyers and journalists.

“Impunity for this horrific act must end. Timely and credible investigations must be undertaken, the perpetrators must be identified and brought to justice and families provided the right to reparation.” Veliko said. “There should be no further delays in making this a punishable offense in every country together with legal standards that ensure full disclosure, transparency and accountability for all persons deprived of their liberty,” Veliko said.

The UN Human Rights Office in Bangkok is committed to working with States to ensure those goals are fully achieved.

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The Regional Office for South-East Asia in Bangkok represents the High Commissioner for Human Rights within South East Asia. The High Commissioner for Human Rights is the principal human rights official of the United Nations and heads the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which spearheads the United Nations’ human rights efforts.

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