

Correspondence

‘Pandemic within a pandemic’: a call to end police brutality

ABSTRACT

This correspondence points out the excessive use of police force in the Philippines since the outbreak of the pandemic. In a recent correspondence, the authors called for a cooperative, honest and considerate attitude toward the government. However, how can one trust the government if it relies heavily on draconian measures in ‘war’ against the pandemic?

Keywords police brutality, pandemic, force, COVID-19

The pandemic lockdown and restrictions are designed to protect the public’s health and reduce the transmission of the virus. Despite being one of the world’s longest and strictest lockdown, the present global pandemic has presented a major challenge to the Philippines. The country logged over 1308 352 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 22 652 as of 13 June 2021¹—the second-highest figures in Southeast Asia. Undoubtedly, lockdowns have prevented Philippine hospitals from being overwhelmed. One of the first manifestations of efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 has been to try to restrict people’s movements; yet staying at home is a luxury only some people can afford. The homeless people who are living on the streets have become *de facto* curfew violators. In their recent Editorial, Premila Webster and Keith asked the question ‘will we be ready for more relaxation of the lockdown measures or for the imposition of more restrictions?’² This correspondence points out the excessive use of police force in the Philippines since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Currently, the media are reporting numerous issues of police abuse worldwide. It is important to note that the police brutality that led to the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and numerous other men and women happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The phrase ‘I can’t breathe’—used by both Eric Garner and George Floyd in their fatal encounters with police—has become a rallying cry for a worldwide movement demanding an end to excessive use of force by police.³ #BlackLivesMatter, a simple call for racial equality, has become a freshly renewed motto for reimagining policing. In the Philippine context, the hashtag #PulisAngTerorista

(Police are the terrorists) topped Philippine Twitter after a cop kills 52-year-old woman, with netizens blasting the state’s uniformed men who sow ‘terror’ in communities.⁴

In a recent correspondence in the *Journal of Public Health*, the authors called for a cooperative, honest and considerate attitude toward the government.⁵ However, how can one trust the government if it relies heavily on draconian measures in ‘war’ against COVID19? The message to maintain discipline and follow the government’s orders has been repeated constantly since the President Duterte began his weekly address to the nation on 12 March 2020. In his speech on 16 April 2020, Duterte threatened that if the lack of discipline among Filipinos persists ‘the military and the police will take over. I am ordering them now to be ready. The police and the military will enforce social distancing and curfew. They will. It is just like martial law too. You choose’.⁶ Filipinos opposed to Duterte’s militaristic approach have taken to social media to protest from home, posting photos and hashtags with the words, #Bigashindibala (Rice, not bullets) and #SolusyongMedikalHindiMilitar (Medical solutions, not military solutions). Restrictions and warrantless arrests were performed without due process. Some Filipinos have labelled the plan ‘Tokhang 2’, calling it the sequel to a police-led antidrug campaign (Tokhang) that became synonymous with thousands of killings.⁷ The Commission on Human Rights spokesperson Jacqueline Ann de Guia said while they recognize the need for all to observe basic health protocols, reasonable disciplinary measures must be implemented against violators.⁸ The United Nations (UN) ‘expressed grave concern at the multiplication of accounts of police killings and other acts

of violence within the context of COVID-19 emergency measures'.⁹ Furthermore, as noted by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, there has been an alarming rise in police brutality and civil rights violations under the guise of exceptional or emergency measures. Alarmed by the human rights abuses in the Philippines, the International Criminal Court Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda has requested authorization to open an investigation into Duterte's war on drugs saying 'there is a reasonable basis to believe Crime Against Humanity of Murder was committed from at least 1 July 2016 to 16 March 2019'.¹⁰ Duterte's violent populism and pandemic response (as with the war on drugs) effectively diverts attention away and also presents a 'death of development'.¹¹ Duterte's rhetoric and tirades hides an inconvenient truth, that is, the Philippines continues to lag in its COVID-19 pandemic response, and many Filipinos continue to suffer pandemic within a pandemic.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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