

Speech of Fr. Angelito Andig Cortez OFM

Order of Friars Minor | National Coordinator for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

UNHRC59 Side event on freedom of expression in the Philippines

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Peace and all good.

Thank you to Franciscans International and our co-organizers for bringing this urgent issue before the international community. I also express my deepest gratitude to Special Rapporteur Irene Khan for her courageous and truthful report. Special thanks to Fastenaction for their unwavering solidarity and support.

I am Fr. Angelito Andig Cortez, OFM, a Franciscan friar from the Philippines. I serve as the National Coordinator for Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and Co-Executive Secretary of the Conference of Major Superiors in the Philippines (CMSP).

Today, I speak not as a statistic, nor as a distant observer. I speak as one who has personally felt the cold shadow of repression — the chilling effects of red-tagging, death threats, and intimidation. I stand with countless members of the Church and civil society who endure this same dark reality.

At the core of this crisis lies a sacred and universal human right: freedom of expression — the right to speak truth to power, to defend human dignity, and to advocate for justice without fear of retaliation. Yet in the Philippines, this fundamental freedom is increasingly under attack. It is suffocated by fear, by lies, and by state-sanctioned violence.

In 2022, after returning from international advocacy missions, I became a target of the Philippine government's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) — the primary driver of red-tagging in our country. I received multiple death threats — clear, direct, and coordinated. One message warned:

"We were ordered to have you killed. Four of us are already deployed in Manila. But when we found out you are a priest, we paused. We don't want your family hurt."

They knew where I lived. They tracked my movements. They monitored my family. And I believed them.

Because of this terror, I had no choice but to voluntarily exile myself to an undisclosed country, for my safety and that of my congregation and family. I lived in hiding, away from my homeland, bearing the weight of fear and separation. This was not an easy decision, but a necessary one to survive the trauma inflicted by NTF-ELCAC's campaign.

I only returned to the Philippines last January, reclaiming my role in CMSP, with even deeper resolve to continue our mission for truth, justice, and peace.

But the harassment did not stop with me.

Our CMSP driver, Bernard — a humble and faithful man — was abducted in front of our office. He was blinded, detained in a car for hours, and interrogated — not because he was an activist, but because he served an institution that defends truth and human rights. The operatives showed him photos of his wife, his daughter, and his home. Then they asked:

"Why are your priests and nuns in CMSP working with terrorists and rebels?"

This language — this accusation — is the hallmark of NTF-ELCAC's systematic red-tagging campaign. Their goal: to silence dissent and intimidate Church workers, humanitarian actors, and civil society groups who accompany the poor and advocate for justice.

Let there be no mistake: this is not just a personal attack. This is an orchestrated assault by the state — through NTF-ELCAC — on the Church, on civil society, and on the freedom of expression of every Filipino who dares to speak truth.

I remember the faces of the innocent we have buried during the so-called war on drugs:

- *Kian delos Santos*, a 17-year-old boy executed while begging for his life.
- *Skyler*, a young child lost in senseless violence.
- Countless others — nameless, voiceless, forgotten — whose families we have consoled, whose wounds remain open.

What is our crime?

- To pray over the dead.
- To protect the living.
- To accompany the forgotten, the poor, and the excluded.
- To speak truth in the face of fear.

Our mission partners — the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, and many others — are also branded enemies of the state by NTF-ELCAC for doing what is morally right: defending the dignity of the poor and accompanying the persecuted. Because we walk with them, we share in their vilification.

Make no mistake: red-tagging is not a harmless label. It is a death sentence. It gives a green light to surveillance, harassment, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings. It is a direct assault on the right to dissent and the right to speak freely — the very essence of freedom of expression.

While the Supreme Court ruling in May 2024 that red-tagging threatens life and liberty gives us hope, hope alone will not dismantle a machinery of fear.

We demand justice.

We demand the passage of the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill.

We demand the repeal of the Anti-Terror Law and Batas Pambansa 880 — laws that criminalize protest and silence dissent.

We demand the abolition of NTF-ELCAC, a state-funded instrument of repression.

And we call on the international community to act — not with silence or sympathy, but with accountability.

As a Franciscan, I say with conviction: true peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice, truth, mercy, and solidarity.

We do not seek privilege.

We seek only what is just: protection for those who uphold the Gospel, defend the Constitution, and speak out — even when it is dangerous to do so.

To the mothers who mourn their children, the children who live in fear, and the human rights defenders who continue their work in the dark: you are not alone.

Your pain is our pain.

Your courage inspires us.

Your struggle is sacred.

We will not abandon you.

We will speak. We will stand. We will persist.

To the international community:

Your silence is complicity.

Your indifference is permission.

If you turn away from those who suffer, you strengthen the very systems that kill them.

So I ask you — governments, institutions, people of conscience:

Will you stand with the oppressed or turn away?

Will you raise your voice, or let it be drowned out by impunity?

History will remember those who chose courage over convenience, justice over silence, and hope over despair.