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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Murder of Philippine human rights activist Zara Alvarez

The Philippine human rights defender, teacher and single mother of a minor daughter, Zara Alvarez, was fatally shot on the evening of August 17, 2020 close to her apartment in Bacolod City, on Negros Island from so far unknown assailants. Zara Alvarez was a committed and recognized human rights activist who fought for the rights of marginalized communities. She worked closely with other human rights, NGOs and church organizations. Most recently, she worked for the Health organization NIHP-CD (Negros Integrated Health Program for Community Development).

Zara Alvarez had received death threats for years. This had already begun around 15 years ago. Alvarez was eventually arrested on bogus charges in October 2012. She was accused by the Philippine military of being a member of the communist rebel group New People's Army (NPA). The accusation against her was based on fake evidence. Zara Alvarez was imprisoned for almost two years. The procedure was served the purpose of restricting the work of human rights defenders and intimidate their families, colleagues, and the public. Not until March of this year, eight years after the indictment and arrest, Zara Alvarez was acquitted for lack of evidence. Zara Alvarez continued to be defamed for her acquittal, denounced as a terrorist and suffered

Additionally, in February 2018 she was one of 600 human rights activists being accused of being a communist terrorist by the government of Rodrigo Duterte. She received further death threats and lived more persistently under the great strain, danger to her life and legal uncertainty. The long-lasting repression against Zara Alvarez eventually culminated in her murder.

For years, various human rights organizations have indicated that the Filipino State under the guise of counter-terrorism has waged a brutal campaign against human rights defenders and other civil society groups. Their commitment to human rights, a clean environment, a fair land distribution and the rights of indigenous peoples was hindered and de-legitimized by the government. Zara Alvarez is just one of at least 182 documented victims under President Duterte who has created an atmosphere of impunity. The Philippines are one of the countries with the most murders of human rights defenders - at least 182 documented such murders have occurred since President Duterte took office in 2016. Of these extrajudicial killings, 48 were human rights defenders inside alone in the period from February 2019 until today.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to call on the Government of the Philippines to:

- immediately and publicly condemn the murder of Zara Alvarez,
- immediately work on solving the murder of Zara Alvarez and make sure that both perpetrators and masterminds are being held responsible,
- cease all intimidation, threats and violence against human rights defenders, by state security forces, civil servants and government officials,
- withdraw the recently passed anti-terrorism law,
- end impunity.