



The Unseen War

Widespread IHL Violations Happening Amidst
2025 Midterm Elections



International Observers Mission
on the 2025 Philippine Elections
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IHL Violations Amidst 2025 Elections

The 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections have been marred by significant violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), or the rules of war. This is especially true in the impoverished rural communities throughout the Philippine countryside that are plagued by increasing militarization by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), as well as presence of foreign troops including those from the United States. These IHL violations have been well documented under both the Duterte and Marcos Jr regimes, including by the 2024 International People's Tribunal (IPT) which found both administrations guilty of war crimes against the Filipino people¹.

The Midterm Elections are unfolding against the backdrop of a decades-long armed conflict between the Government Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and a revolutionary national liberation movement represented by the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). In response to the revolutionary movement, the GRP engages in violent repression of the people through "counterterrorism" and "counterinsurgency" campaigns which have led to widespread violations of human rights and IHL. Despite claims by Marcos Jr that the human rights situation has improved following the Duterte regime, militarization and war crimes by the AFP have intensified.

IHL is a set of rules which seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict and to reduce the human suffering caused by it. It requires belligerent forces to make a distinction between combatants and military objects on the one hand, and civilians and civilian objects on the other hand. As stated by Marjorie Cohn, an expert witness during the IPT², "The Philippines' US-inspired counter-insurgency program does not distinguish between civilians and combatants, which is considered a war crime under the Geneva Conventions". Under the guise of fighting the armed revolutionary movement, the GRP's counterinsurgency campaigns have deliberately targeted any and all forms of dissent, including the campaigning of activists and civilian organizations. They are carried out by the various state and state-aligned machineries including the AFP, Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGU), the Philippine National Police (PNP) and various other militia and vigilante groups.

These campaigns have received the cooperation and support of the United States Government through military aid, training, weapons and deployment of US troops to military bases in the Philippines. Ahead of the 2025 Midterm Elections, the US State Department approved two arms sales to the Philippine Government for \$336 million in February³, and \$120 million in April⁴.

The 2022 International Observers Mission (IOM) documented instances of election-related violations of IHL against civilians, including political killings, shootings, abductions, political arrests and detention, harassment and surveillance of candidates and supporters, and red-tagging⁵. These violations were common throughout the Presidencies of Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand Marcos Jr., and have similarly been used to repress support, dissent and opposition ahead of the May 2025 Midterm Elections.

Human rights organizations have raised concerns about the pattern of abductions and enforced disappearances of human rights defenders during the first three years of Marcos Jr's Presidency. In April 2025, there were two separate incidents of abduction and illegal arrests of individuals campaigning for progressive partylist candidates. Pauline Joy Banjawan, Southern Tagalog campaign coordinator for Bayan Muna, was abducted and found two days later in the custody of the Philippine National Police at the Batangas jail⁶. According to Bayan Muna, Banjawan underwent physical and mental torture for two days while in the hands of the Philippine military in an effort to suppress opposition ahead of the May elections⁷. Similarly in Isabela province, Kabataan Partylist coordinator Andy Magno was illegally arrested on April 25⁸. Abduction, torture, and enforced disappearance are all violations of IHL.

This use of military force against civilians is a tool to intimidate political opposition and suppress democratic participation in the election process. It violates the rights of the most marginalized and oppressed sectors of Philippine society and silences any and all forms of advocacy for basic demands around wages, land, and sovereignty. A free and fair electoral process is not genuinely possible when civilians are intimidated and silenced from participating in the broader democratic struggle for their collective rights.

Footnotes

¹<https://peopletribunal.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/IPT-2024-INITIAL-Verdict-18-May.pdf>

²Read Cohn's testimony on page 36 of the IPT Book of Proceedings: <https://peopletribunal.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/IPT-Book-of-Proceedings-WEB.pdf>

³<https://asianews.network/us-security-assistance-to-the-philippines-exempted-from-aid-freeze/>

⁴<https://theasialive.com/u-s-approves-120-million-sale-of-th-73a-training-helicopters-to-philippines/2025/04/16/>

⁵<https://ichrp.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-06-28-IOM-Final-Report.pdf>

⁶<https://chr.gov.ph/statement-of-the-commission-on-human-rights-on-the-case-of-the-resurfaced-urban-poor-organizer-in-batangas/>

⁷<https://www.bulatlat.com/2025/04/30/missing-bayan-muna-coordinator-found-detained-on-criminal-charges/>

⁸<https://nordis.net/2025/04/23/article/news/rights-group-disputes-militarys-clash-arrest-claims-in-isabela/>



Highlighted Incidents

Killing of two youths in Masbate

In December of 2024, alleged members of the Philippine military killed two youths in Uson, Masbate, Bicol Region as they returned home from a Christmas party. The killing of JP Osabel, 14, and Redjan Montealegre, 18, was a clear violation of IHL. The killings followed a pattern of attacks on civilians in the Bicol Region in recent years, where members of the AFP have fabricated encounters with the New People's Army (NPA) to justify targeting civilians.

Aerial bombing and strafing in Mindoro

On March 1, 2025, members of the AFP conducted aerial bombing and strafing in an alleged military encounter in Mansalay, Oriental Mindoro. Strafing and bombing of civilian areas violates the principle of distinction in IHL, which provides that parties to an armed conflict must "at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives."