

Beyond the Killings: Justice and Human Rights in the Philippines' War on Drugs

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CHR	Commission on Human Rights
CMC	Command Memorandum Circular
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
HVT	High Value Target
ICC	International Criminal Court
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
PNP	Philippine National Police
RUPL	Rise Up for Life and for Rights

1. INTRODUCTION

The presidency of Rodrigo Duterte from 2016 to 2022 represents a challenging chapter in Philippine history. At the centre of his administration was the controversial “war on drugs” initially operated through *Oplan Tokhang*, which aimed to remove drug peddlers and users from the streets in order to provide peace and order to society. His campaign promise to take a hard stance on eradicating drugs resonated with many Filipinos, earning Duterte popularity and support among the masses, who wanted less criminality. However, the execution of such “war on drugs” policies gave rise to the question of where to draw the line between state-sanctioned violence and effective law enforcement. While the Duterte administration defended the campaign as necessary to restore peace and order in the country, many critics, including human rights organisations, brought to light the erosion of the rule of law and the gravity of the impact of the policies on vulnerable sectors of the community.

In the international arena, the human rights violations of the “war on drugs” campaign attracted significant attention, with the United Nations (UN) calling for investigations into the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines. Other organisations and foreign governments also expressed concern over the magnitude of such human rights abuses. Later, the involvement of the International Criminal Court (ICC) marked a milestone in this controversial issue, as Duterte and the Philippines became a focal point for discussions on accountability, international law, and domestic sovereignty.

Given that proceedings related to the Duterte administration’s “war on drugs” are still pending with the ICC, this report aims to provide an overview of this ongoing issue and provide context to the case. It discusses Duterte’s rise and ascent to power, examines his political background and motivations, outlines his presidential campaign promises in 2016, and assesses the legacy of his presidential policies in Philippine politics. It also analyses his “war on drugs” campaign, which resulted in allegations of extrajudicial killings by local police. The policy led to widespread violence and thousands of deaths. Also, it analyses the social and human rights challenges faced by the families of the victims and the Filipino community as a whole.

In addition, the report discusses the response of the domestic and international community, the context of how this case was brought before the ICC and the ongoing status of the case. It also discusses the legal challenges of bringing this case under the purview of international law, in light of the Philippines’ withdrawal from the Rome Statute. Further, the report looks ahead to justice and accountability in the Philippines, and offers insights into the possible reparation mechanisms for victims, the role of civil society and the need for institutional reforms, to ensure that such widespread violence in the country does not recur.

2. DUTERTE'S RISE TO POWER



By Pyrrhus Cunanan, via Unsplash, June 22nd, 2022.

<https://unsplash.com/photos/a-flag-on-a-pole-wVQnWfwKxCc>

2.1 Political Ascendancy

The legacy of Rodrigo Duterte, the former President of the Republic of the Philippines, marks a controversial shift in Philippine governance. His strongman persona and his “war on drugs” campaign had a profound impact on the country, resulting in serious human rights consequences.

His rise to the presidency was a culmination of decades of political power as mayor of Davao City, a city located in the southern part of the Philippines. He held this position for 22 years across seven terms; and, as mayor, he already had a reputation for being tough against criminals and drug offenders (Romero, Jr., 2016).

During his mayoral tenure in Davao City, he was accused of tolerating or supporting a so-called “Davao death squad”, allegedly responsible for thousands of killings in the city (Human Rights Watch, 2015). From his point of view, killing criminals ensured the city’s public safety. This was emphasised during a speech where he shared, “We’re the ninth safest city. How do you think I did it? How did I reach that title among the world’s safest cities? Kill them all [criminals]” (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

2.2 Campaign Promises and Presidential Legacy

During his early presidential campaign, Duterte was nicknamed “The Punisher” and vowed to execute thousands of criminals if he won the elections:

If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because I'd kill you.. I'll dump all of you into Manila Bay, and fatten all the fish there (BBC NEWS, 2016). His authoritarian style and direct manner of speaking attracted the Filipino masses, who wanted a change in government.

His campaign strategy made use of social media influencers who would share their story about how crime affected their lives, making them relatable and appealing to voters (Lamble & Mohan, 2016). The campaign volunteers also heavily relied on social media platforms using the hashtag #Du30, which rhymes with Duterte’s name, to engage people’s attention.

While the online network of supporters had a global network, it was reported that it included fake news, fake accounts, and online trolls (Lamble & Mohan, 2016). However, according to Maria Ressa, the Chief Executive Officer of Rappler and a 2021 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, this strategy of “manufactured reality” in social media “created[d] a very real chilling effect against normal people, against journalists (who) are the first targets” (Lamble & Mohan, 2016).

Nevertheless, due to the success of his campaign strategy and the overwhelming support of the voters, he won the national presidential elections in 2016 after he garnered the majority of the votes, which represents around 39 percent of the total votes, becoming the sixteenth president of the Philippines (Romero, Jr., 2016).

2.3 Initial Policies: *Oplan Tokhang*

Duterte kept his word when he claimed that he planned to kill criminals if he was elected to the presidency. One of his initial policies, which was immediately implemented, was the *Oplan Tokhang*. *Oplan* translates to “Operation Plan” while *Tokhang* is the combination of words *toktok*, which means to knock, and *hangyo*, which means to plead (Ong, 2018). This operation was implemented in Davao City as early as 2013, where police officers visited the houses of suspected drug pushers or users and asked them to surrender to the authorities (Gacayan, 2020).

When Duterte was elected to the presidency, *Oplan Tokhang* was implemented nationwide and evolved into the “Philippine National Police (PNP) Anti-Illegal Drugs Campaign Plan Project: Double Barrel”, which was issued in July 2016. This project was a two-pronged approach where police were instructed to clear all drug-affected areas in the country and to combat drug syndicates, through Project *Tokhang* and Project High Value Target (HVT) or high-value targets (Gacayan, 2020).

The anti-drug war campaign underwent several iterations in 2016 and 2017. Project Double Barrel was amended to Project Double Barrel Alpha from October 26nd, 2016 to January

30th, 2017 and was expanded to cover schools, residential subdivisions, and the entertainment industry (Gacayan, 2020). Under this policy, an Inter-Agency Committee on Illegal Drugs was created. Afterward, given the criticism against rogue policemen and the public outcry from victims of the *Tokhang* operations, the policy was changed to Double Barrel Reloaded from March to October 10th, 2017, calling for the participation of civil society organisations and the use of body cameras for policemen during operations (Gacayan, 2020).

In December 2017, the New Operational Guidelines for Double Barrel were implemented under Presidential Memorandum No. 17, which laid down the rules for proper conduct of the anti-drug campaign operations for enforcement agencies, particularly the Philippine National Police and the Philippine Drugs Enforcement Agency (Gacayan, 2020). Owing to the continued criticism of Duterte's drug war campaign and human rights abuses of the police, this policy attempted to assuage the public by imposing guidelines for the conduct of *Tokhang* operations. Under this policy, any *Tokhang* operation should be composed of a team of police personnel who are accompanied by a member of the city-municipality anti-drug abuse council, a representative from the PNP human-rights office or any human rights advocate, and a representative from the media (Padronia & Cotejo, 2018).

However, with the growing operations of the police to combat drug-related activities, the operations became widely associated with allegations of extrajudicial killings. Nevertheless, despite the increasing death tolls resulting from his campaign, Duterte's political reign remained popular, even earning him an 'excellent' trust rating from the Filipino masses based on survey reports (Rappler, 2016).

3. THE WAR ON DRUGS: POLICIES AND IMPACT



By Andrew Sacriz via Unsplash, March 16th, 2025

<https://unsplash.com/photos/people-gather-around-a-tower-at-night-mbnncaDCLKM>

3.1 Policy Implementation

The architecture of former President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs was formalised through the PNP Command Memorandum Circular (CMC) No. 16-2016 called Project Double Barrel (Gacayan, 2020). The project had two features: *Oplan HVT* and *Oplan Tokhang*. Launched immediately upon Duterte's assumption of power in June 2016, these policies translated his incendiary campaign rhetoric into a national programme of policies widely criticised as enabling state violence. *Oplan HVT* was specifically designed to focus on prominent figures within the drug trade, including distributors, manufacturers, and high-level traffickers, as well as affluent users and celebrities (Ewstacio Jr. et. al., 2022). Meanwhile, *Oplan Tokhang*, derived from the Visayan words *Toktok* and *Hangyo*, was presented officially as a community-based initiative aimed at persuading suspected drug users and petty dealers to surrender to the local law enforcement officers (Gacayan, 2020).

However, the implementation deviated drastically from this benign description. The PNP operated under immense pressure from the administration to produce tangible results, leading to the establishment of informal quotas for the number of surrenderers and, more ominously, for the number of suspects neutralised in operations (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This institutional incentive structure exacerbated the policy, transforming house-to-house visits into terrifying raids where surrender was not a request but a demand, often made under threat (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Moreover, the term “neutralisation” became a widely understood euphemism for extrajudicial killing, a meaning reinforced by Duterte’s own campaign that encouraged lethal force against suspects (Amnesty International, 2019). Beyond formal police operations, the government actively fostered an environment of vigilante violence. Public exhortations for citizens to take the law into their own hands and kill drug dealers created a permissive climate where anonymous death squads and extrajudicial killings could flourish with impunity (Amnesty International, 2019). As a result, the policy framework effectively blurred the lines between state action and private violence, ensuring that the campaign produced widespread fear and insecurity.

3.2 Extrajudicial Killings and Widespread Violence

The execution of these policies unleashed a wave of killings of an unprecedented scale in peacetime Philippines. The PNP’s statistics, which acknowledge over 6,000 deaths in police operations, are contested and considered a significant undercount by domestic and international human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Independent investigations in the Philippines, including those by journalists and advocacy groups, estimate the total number of fatalities to be around 30,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This figure encompasses both those killed in official police operations and the many thousands more victims of unexplained, vigilante-style executions - individuals found bound, gagged, and shot dead, often with crude signs labelling them as drug dealers left on their bodies.

Furthermore, the modality of the violence followed a grimly predictable pattern. Police operations were frequently justified under the pretext of the suspect having resisted arrest or *nanlaban* (Kishi and Buenaventura, 2021). This claim, however, was consistently undermined by overwhelming evidence from eyewitness testimonies, forensic reports, and journalistic investigations. It was commonly reported that victims were killed at point-blank range in their homes, often while their families looked on (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The victims were overwhelmingly from the poorest sectors of Philippine society, particularly urban poor groups, whose population is either unemployed or underemployed (Estacio Jr. et al., 2022). There is a social and behavioural science expert opinion that most drug users resort to such substances to enhance their performance of manual work or to cope with the hardships of poverty (Estacio Jr. et al., 2022). On the other hand, critics argued that the campaign disproportionately targeted the poor, while largely sparing high-level figures. The

pervasive violence created a nationwide climate of fear and impunity, where the state was widely perceived as a source of fear rather than protection.

3.3 Social, Psychological, and Economic Impact on Victims

The impact of the drug war extends far beyond the staggering death toll, leaving deep marks on the social fabric of communities and the psychological well-being of survivors. The most immediate consequence for families was often catastrophic economic destitution. The loss of a primary breadwinner brought households into immediate crisis, forcing widows and mothers into the informal labour market under exploitative conditions to sustain their families (Amnesty International, 2019).

The psychological trauma inflicted is profound and widespread. Children who witnessed the brutal killing of a parent exhibit severe symptoms of trauma, including chronic anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and social withdrawal (Conde, 2020). This trauma is compounded by intense social stigma and shame, as families are ostracised by their communities and burdened by the state's narrative that their targeted loved ones were merely criminals who deserved their fate (Conde, 2020). Their grief is thus rendered illegitimate, and their search for justice is met with official denial and social isolation.

While the government justified its claim that eradicating drugs would foster a more productive society, the climate of violence and insecurity instead deterred investment and damaged local economies. The social costs, including caring for thousands of orphaned children, traumatised individuals, and fractured families, have placed an immense, unacknowledged burden on civil society and remnant social services, as the state has largely freed itself from its responsibility to provide reparations or support. The war on drugs has therefore left a legacy, not of safety, but of immense social injury, economic ruin, and psychological devastation, creating a critical need for healing, justice, and accountability that remains overwhelmingly unaddressed.

4. PUBLIC RESPONSES AND THE ROAD TO THE ICC



By Sasun Bughdaryan via Unsplash, April 18th, 2021

<https://unsplash.com/photos/open-book-on-brown-wooden-table-ozS0tPf8QT0>

4.1 Domestic and International Reactions

The launch of the war on drugs attracted a variety of domestic and international reactions. In the Philippines, this campaign initially gained popular support nationwide (Gershman, 2016). According to Pulse Asia Research, 86 percent of the Filipino public approved of Duterte's decisive actions against drug trafficking. Despite some concerns about extreme violence resulting in deaths, Duterte managed to maintain his support as he promoted socio-economic programs in parallel (Gershman, 2016).

However, public opinion began to shift after thousands of people were reported killed as a result of Duterte's war on drugs. The majority of civil society organisations (CSOs), ranging from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to religious institutions, protested against Duterte's anti-drug policy as the extrajudicial killings and violent abuses continued (Lozada, 2021). For example, since the Philippines hosts the largest Catholic population in Asia, the Catholic Church historically played a key role in resisting authoritarian governments and policies. Catholic bishops openly criticised Duterte's war on drugs while providing shelters for victims of the war on drugs (Lozada, 2021).

Local CSOs also pushed for lobbying international organisations to probe the war on drugs more seriously. For instance, more than 300 NGOs in the Philippines successfully lobbied

UN agencies to pressure the Duterte government (Lozada, 2021). Particularly, the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) published the report in 2020, highlighting the atrocities of Duterte's drug crackdown as human rights violations through the rhetoric of counterterrorism and national security (OHCHR, 2020; BBC, 2020).

4.2 Legal Basis for ICC Proceedings

Fundamentally, the ICC was established as a result of the 2002 Rome Statute, covering jurisdiction over four types of crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression (ICC, n.d.). The ICC has the complementary power to support national courts when cases in question cannot be investigated at the national level due to different circumstances (ICC, 2020). The ICC can only exercise the complementary power according to the following conditions.

1. **State Party:** The crimes must be committed by an individual who is a national of an ICC State Party or must occur in the territory of a State that ratified the Rome Statute or accepted the Court's jurisdiction on an *ad hoc* basis.
2. **United Nations Security Council (UNSC):** The UNSC has the authority to refer cases to the ICC Prosecutor according to Chapter VII of the UN Charter (ICC, n.d.).

Once the case is officially submitted to the ICC, the case will go through the following stages:

1. **Preliminary examinations:** This process determines whether the case falls under the ICC jurisdiction, as well as regarding the sufficiency of evidence and the potential outcome of serving justice to the victims.
2. **Investigations:** The ICC prosecutors commence the investigation into a case to collect evidence and identify suspects, followed by requesting an arrest warrant or a summons to appear.
3. **Pre-Trial stage:** This process ensures that the suspect appears before three ICC judges for legal hearings of the charges.
4. **Trial stage:** Three ICC judges will consider all evidence presented and deliver a verdict.
5. **Appeals stage:** This process allows the convicted individual or the victims to appeal after the trial.
6. **Enforcement of sentence:** Once the final sentence is concluded, it will be served in the State Party where ICC has the power to enforce the sentence (ICC, n.d.).

In the case of the Philippines, the country ratified the Rome Statute, which officially entered into force on November 1st, 2011 (Al Jazeera, 2019). Since the Philippines was subject to the jurisdiction of the ICC when the war on drugs occurred, a Filipino lawyer, Jude Sabio, filed the case against Duterte and his fellows at the ICC in 2017 (Holmes, 2017). The ICC Office of the Prosecutor responded by subsequently carrying out the preliminary examination in February 2018 to establish the grounds for further investigation. In September 2021, the

ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber I (hereafter referred to as "the Chamber") approved the Office of the Prosecutor to begin an investigation into Duterte's war on drugs (ICC, 2025).

On March 7th, 2025, the Chamber eventually issued an arrest warrant against Duterte on allegations of crimes against humanity, including extrajudicial killing, torture, and sexual violence through extrajudicial killing, torture, and sexual violence on Philippine soil (ICC, 2025). However, the Duterte government exercised its sovereign decision to withdraw the Philippines from the ICC membership on March 17th, 2018, according to the right stated in Article 127 of the Rome Statute. This action terminated its State Party status (ICC, 2018). This issue will be discussed in the next subsection.

4.3 Sovereignty vs. Accountability: The Philippines' Withdrawal from the Rome Statute

Shortly after the case was filed against Duterte, his government attempted to bar the ICC's intervention and further complicated the ICC criminal proceedings. According to Article 127 of the Rome Statute, the Philippines' withdrawal became formalised on March 17th, 2019 exactly a year after the ICC was notified in writing (Amnesty International, 2021).

The Philippines' withdrawal sparked a critical debate about whether the ICC still has the power to prosecute Duterte. Since the war on drugs was committed from 2016 onwards, the case fell under the period before the Philippines' withdrawal (between November 1st, 2011 and March 16th, 2019) (Al Jazeera, 2019). Therefore, "the ICC retains jurisdiction over crimes allegedly committed in the Philippines while the country was a State Party to the Statute" (ICC, 2025). In 2020, the Supreme Court of the Philippines also confirmed the ICC's jurisdiction and the country's obligation to cooperate even after the withdrawal (Amnesty International, 2021).

In contrast, Duterte's defence lawyers asserted that the Court no longer had jurisdiction over the Philippines once the country exited the Rome Statute in 2019 because the ICC did not authorise the formal investigation until 2021 (Borden, 2025). Moreover, Article 127(2) of the Rome Statute states that the ICC shall have jurisdiction *ratione temporis*, the temporal scope of jurisdiction, if the case involving the withdrawing State Party has already been "under consideration by the Court". This includes the period when the withdrawal takes effect (Schuldt, 2025). To determine whether Duterte's case is "under consideration by the Court", the ICC has to decide whether the preliminary examination conducted prior to the Philippines' withdrawal fulfils this requirement (Schuldt, 2025).

5. DUTERTE'S ARREST AND THE ONGOING ICC CASE

5.1 Arrest and Initial Reactions

On March 7th, 2025, the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I issued an arrest warrant for the former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on the charge of crimes against humanity (International Criminal Court, 2025). In response, Filipino authorities promptly arrested the former president in Manila on 11 March, 2025 and by the next day, Duterte was surrendered to ICC custody and flown directly to The Hague (Lau, 2025; International Criminal Court, 2025). On March 12th, if carried out, Duterte would be the first Asian former head of state detained in The Hague on an ICC warrant (Lau, 2025; CSIS, 2025).

Duterte's arrest prompted varied reactions. From a humanitarian perspective, human rights organisations and victims of Duterte's crimes commended the development as a breakthrough. For instance, Amnesty International's Secretary General Agnes Callamard praised the arrest as "a long-awaited and monumental step for justice for the thousands of victims and survivors" of Duterte's war on drugs (Amnesty International, 2025). Likewise, Human Rights Watch stated that this is "a long-overdue victory against impunity that could bring victims and their families a step closer to justice" (Lau, 2025). For a mother of one of Duterte's victims, her optimism remains cautious, stating, "This is only the start of our fight... we will not stop fighting" (Lema, 2025).

By contrast, Duterte's allies were outraged, even declaring the ICC's process a breach of Philippine sovereignty. The former president himself contested the arrest as unlawful, and his daughter, the current Vice-President, described the arrest as a "kidnapping" by foreign powers (Lema, 2025). Backlash came not only from Duterte's political allies but also from his mass supporters. Protestors gathered both in Manila and outside the ICC detention centre in The Hague, waving Philippine flags and chanting "bring him home!" in support of the ex-president (Calimbahin, 2025).

5.2 Status of the ICC Trial

On March 14th, 2025, Duterte made his first appearance before the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber I in The Hague. He appeared online from the ICC detention centre and was formally informed of the single charge confirmed in the warrant: the crime against humanity of murder (International Criminal Court, 2025). According to the ICC, the allegations encompass extrajudicial killings committed between November 1st, 2011 and March 16th, 2019 in the Philippines, in his role as the Mayor of the city of Davao and as the President of the Philippines. The ICC referenced alleged Davao Death Squad killings leading to the later nationwide war on drugs in which they were referred to as Duterte's Death Squad. Additionally, in the arrest warrant application, ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan had originally presented evidence of other crimes against humanity (i.e., torture and rape), but the Pre-Trial Chamber found only reasonable grounds for the crime of murder.

Duterte was represented by counsel (including his former executive secretary, Salvador Medialdea), with assistance from the ICC's Office of Public Counsel for the Defence. The Pre-Trial Chamber I, composed of Presiding Judge Iulia Motoc and Judges Reine Alapini-Gansou and María del Socorro Flores Liera, authorised Duterte's remote participation due to security and logistical concerns. They also confirmed that Duterte would remain in ICC custody in The Hague pending further proceedings (International Criminal Court, 2025).

The case against ex-president Duterte is currently still in its pre-trial phase as of date, with a confirmation of charges hearing scheduled for September 23rd, 2025. At the hearing, ICC prosecutors will present evidence to a panel of judges to determine whether there is substantial ground to believe Duterte committed the crimes alleged. The confirmation of the murder charges will then lead to a full trial before the ICC's Trial Chamber (International Criminal Court, 2025). In this current trial process, the Office of the Prosecutor has been submitting a witness list and thousands of pages of documentation to the defence for review (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism [PCIJ], 2025a). Most importantly, victims of Duterte's alleged crimes can participate in this case. In April 2025, the Pre-Trial Chamber granted the ICC Registry's request to facilitate participation for those who have suffered harm from the war on drugs killings and have been invited to apply as formal participants in the proceedings (PCIJ, 2025b).

5.3 Challenges in Legal Proceedings

The first major issue concerns ICC's jurisdiction given the Philippines' withdrawal from the Rome Statute. The Philippines formally left the ICC effective March 17th, 2019, a year after Duterte unilaterally initiated withdrawal when the ICC began scrutinising his drug war. However, under Article 127 of the Rome Statute, a State's withdrawal does not extinguish jurisdiction over crimes that occurred on its territory while it was an ICC member. The ICC has affirmed that it retains jurisdiction over alleged crimes in the Philippines from November 1st, 2011 (when the country joined the ICC) until March 16th, 2019 (the last day before withdrawal took effect) (Amnesty International, 2025; International Criminal Court, 2025). All of the charges against Duterte fall within this period.

However, Duterte's defence lawyers argue that the proceedings of the court are illegitimate because the authorisation of the full investigation on September 15th, 2021 occurred after the Philippines was no longer a state party, contending that "the preconditions for the exercise of jurisdiction in the Philippine case were not met" (PCIJ, 2025b). Most legal experts consider the argument unlikely to succeed, given the clear precedent of continued "legacy" jurisdiction (Asian Journal of International Law, 2025).

Another concern is securing cooperation from the Philippines throughout what will be a lengthy international trial process. The execution of Duterte's arrest in March was efficient, as local authorities were assisted by Interpol, leaving the ex-president with no time to rally political or legal assistance (Ratcliffe, 2025). However, sustaining this cooperation is a

concern as Filipino authorities have indicated they will not actively assist the ICC beyond the Interpol arrest (a stance meant to appease domestic critics). Therefore, gathering evidence or facilitating witness testimonies may prove to be difficult (Calimbahin, 2025). Warrants for other suspects (Duterte's subordinates or co-accused), if they are charged, could also potentially evade capture by staying outside ICC-member jurisdiction.

6. MOVING FORWARD: JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

6.1 Reparation Efforts for Victims

The absence of a progressive reparations program spearheaded by the state is one of the most alarming gaps in making amends to the injustices of the war on drugs in the Philippines. Reparations are not only a mechanism to compensate material losses but are central to recognising victims' dignity, restoring trust in public institutions, and sending a signal that gross human rights violations will not be tolerated (de Greiff, UNGA 2014). The UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation assert that victims of gross violations are entitled to adequate, effective, and prompt reparation, which may include restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition (UNGA, 2005).

At the moment, civil society initiatives largely replace reparative efforts made with victims of drug wars, even to their families. Organisations such as Rise Up for Life and for Rights (RUPL), provide legal assistance, psychosocial support, and memorialisation projects, yet these efforts are fragmented and mostly not funded (Rise Up for Life and for Rights, 2023). The Philippine government's failure to provide systematic reparations contrasts sharply with its constitutional commitment to uphold the dignity of every human being (Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines 1987, art II, s 11).

6.1.1 Compensation and Material Support

Economic destitution has been the consequence of the extrajudicial killing of a breadwinner in many families. Widows and mothers are frequently forced into informal labour markets to sustain children deprived of education or healthcare opportunities (Amnesty International, 2019). Therefore, compensation is not only monetary - it is curative, which is aimed at avoiding poverty between generations that is caused by state violence. The Human Rights Victims Reparation and Recognition Act of 2013, which awarded reparations to victims of Martial Law under Ferdinand Marcos, offers a precedent, creating a board funded partially through recovered ill-gotten wealth (Republic Act No. 10368, 2013). A similar system could be created that would respond to the drug war by providing meaningful support to families.

6.1.2 Psychosocial Rehabilitation

The emotional toll on individuals or their families is immense. Children exposed to killings suffer trauma, including nightmares, depression, and social withdrawal (Amnesty International, 2017). Psychosocial rehabilitation must therefore be an integral part and parcel of any reparations policy. Comparative examples include Colombia, where state-run centres provide trauma counselling and community-based healing for victims of armed conflict (ICTJ, 2017).

Such models may be used to guide the formulation of rehabilitation programmes in the Philippines, which in turn may provide structured assistance to the NGO initiatives that tend to be *ad hoc*.

One mother of a drug war victim poignantly expressed her grief:

Every time I see a photo of my son, I feel my heart being pierced (Amnesty International, 2019).

This quote highlights the long-term emotional destruction that the killings have left on the people and the urgent need for formal acknowledgement and reparations.

6.1.3 Symbolic Reparations and Memory

Reparations should also give victims a sense of worth by taking some symbolic actions. Memorials, public apologies, and community remembrance projects help validate suffering and counter denial (Hayner, 2011). In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlighted symbolic reparations as critical in affirming victims' worth and fostering social cohesion (Hayner, 2011). Official apologies, the establishment of a memorial to victims of the drug war, or a day of remembrance to recognise the mass trauma in the Philippine context could make a difference in combatting impunity.

6.1.4 Guarantees of Non-Repetition

Material and symbolic reparations are not adequate without social change to avoid repetition. This requires revising law enforcement practices, strengthening prosecutorial independence, and integrating human rights education across the justice sector (ICTJ, 2021). Reparations divorced from institutional transformation risk reducing justice to mere financial payouts (ICTJ, 2021). Particular urgency in relation to non-repetition concerns the previous denials of wrongdoing and the efforts of the government to normalise extrajudicial practices.

6.1.5 Victims' Voices at the Core of Reparations

Meaningful reparations must be designed in consultation with victims themselves. As one widow told Reuters after the ICC's arrest warrant against Duterte: "we are finally getting justice for our loved ones who were taken from us" (Reuters, 2025). This statement highlights

the importance of official recognition, dignity, and repair alongside material compensation. The inclusion of victims' narratives is central to designing reparations that are substantive rather than symbolic.

6.1.6 International Comparative Insights

Other transitional justice contexts offer lessons for the Philippines. In Germany, reparations for Holocaust survivors included direct compensation and pensions, symbolic measures, and educational initiatives to ensure non-repetition (Aust, 1999). In Timor-Leste, victims of conflict-related sexual violence received compensation and psychosocial support through a dedicated reparations fund (UNDP Timor-Leste, 2015). Kosovo implemented reparations schemes for victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict, combining financial support with psychosocial rehabilitation and memorialisation (OSCE, 2018). These examples demonstrate that comprehensive reparations frameworks can provide both material relief and societal recognition, reinforcing the moral and legal imperative to address human rights violations.

6.2 Role of Civil Societies and International Advocacy

Starting with NGOs and international action, civil society and international advocacy have a role to play in protecting and securing the rights of the individual. CSOs have been invaluable in holding to account and empowering victims. Domestic groups such as RUPL have mobilised families of victims, compiled documentation, and submitted evidence to the ICC (Rise Up, 2023). International organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have simultaneously penalised impunity by publishing investigations and advocacy campaigns calling for accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Amnesty International, 2017).

One of the most touching pieces of evidence given by a mother, whose sons were killed in 2017, depicts this emotional process: Apor Pasco reflects that:

I was so nervous and scared yet at the same time excited... This is it — upon hearing of Duterte's ICC arrest (Regencia, 2025).

Another grieving mother, Christine Pascual, whose 17-year-old boy Joshua had been murdered, said:

...it's been very painful... nothing's happening about my son's case... we are very happy that now he will have to face us in court (Regencia, 2025).

And one mother of a victim speaks of her continued suffering:

I feel an unbearable pain losing a child to the drug war (Regencia, 2025).

Such testimonies, usually mediated by civil society and reported by media are crucial testimonies with which justice narratives are provided concrete grounding in the life world of victims.

6.3 Reforms for Restorative Justice, Reconciliation, and Accountability

6.3.1 Community-Based Restorative Mechanisms

Development projects initiated by communities can be transformative in ending cycles of silence and impunity. Truth-telling processes - whether formal, as in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or informal, as in Colombia's community reconciliation dialogues - offer victims a platform to share experiences publicly and confront perpetrators (Hayner, 2011). In the case of the Philippines, it may be an advantage to set up localised truth forums where people can tell their loss, seek recognition, and commemorate the dead. Memorialisation projects, including murals, memory days or online databases, would replace state narratives which stigmatise victims and instead reaffirm their humanity. Evidence from post-conflict societies shows that such initiatives help rebuild trust in communities and reduce stigma (Teitel, 2000).

In the words of a mother who lost her child in a drug raid:

They called my son a criminal, but he was just a boy who dreamed of finishing school
(Rise Up, 2023).

Public memorials and truth platforms would provide dignity to such testimonies and challenge the culture of dehumanisation.

6.3.2 Strengthening Independent Institutions

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) remains one of the few domestic actors resisting impunity, yet it faces severe structural challenges, including underfunding, lack of cooperation from the police, and political intimidation (Rappler, 2022). Strengthening of the CHR is necessary, requiring:

- Legislative guarantees of independence, ensuring budgetary autonomy and security of tenure for commissioners.
- Enhanced investigative powers, including subpoena authority over police and military institutions, to overcome obstruction.
- Victim-centred approaches, mandating trauma-informed procedures and survivor participation in investigations.

A robust CHR would supplement the ICC and provide a domestic legal foundation, making the practice permanent even when international prosecutions end.

6.3.3 ICC as a Cornerstone of Accountability

The ICC investigation of the Philippine war on drugs is the first of its kind, as it is one of the few instances when a sitting or former head of state is investigated by the ICC into the crime of mass atrocity outside armed conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Although ICC trials

play a crucial role, they have a number of shortcomings, including excessive length, limited funding, and a weak ability to integrate into the local context (Kersten, 2016).

To maximise impact, the ICC trial must be accompanied by:

1. Domestic outreach programmes that translate legal developments into accessible language for affected communities.
2. Complementarity mechanisms that encourage Philippine courts to reopen investigations and prosecutions at the national level.
3. Victim participation schemes, ensuring families' voices shape the judicial narrative, not just international lawyers and judges.

As one victim's mother noted after hearing of Duterte's ICC arrest warrant:

We are very happy that now he will have to face us in court (Regencia, 2025).

This reflects not only a desire for justice but also for direct engagement in accountability processes.

6.3.4 Linking Grassroots Advocacy with International Pressure

Citizen movements are the ethical core of transitional justice. Support networks like Rise Up and Catholic Church have assisted the victims to organise themselves, document the abuses, and get psychological healing (Rise Up, 2023).

However, local groups cannot account on their own without centralised powers to hold those who are owing to blame and without anonymity they can act as spoilers when central power takes sides with one party over others, and they can work as a stumbling block when the central power shifts sides when some party is more favoured by the central power than others or when they are not needed by the central power due to change of loyalties to certain other new parties or other reasons that cause the central powers to fail the local groups. International actors (like the UN Human Rights Council, European Union, and Transnational NGOs) have the ability to raise local voices, fund local initiatives, and use diplomatic leverage.

A holistic accountability ecosystem thus requires:

- Coalition-building between grassroots organisations, lawyers' groups, and international partners.
- Capacity-building to equip victims' associations with legal, advocacy, and psychosocial tools.
- Media strategies to counter state disinformation campaigns that portray victims as criminals.

International experience shows that hybrid models - such as Sierra Leone's Special Court or Colombia's hybrid tribunals - achieve stronger legitimacy when they integrate local voices with international oversight (Sriram, 2013).

6.3.5 From Retribution to Restorative Justice

While criminal accountability is essential, restorative justice seeks to rebuild communities fractured by state violence. Restorative approaches may include:

- Dialogue sessions between victims' families and state institutions (if possible, police representatives), to acknowledge harm and rebuild trust.
- Community service sentences for low-level perpetrators, linking accountability to social repair.
- Education campaigns in schools, ensuring that the war on drugs is remembered not as a victory against crime but as a cautionary tale of mass human rights abuse.

As Teitel (2000) argues, transitional justice is not only about punishing perpetrators but about reconstituting the rule of law and civic trust. In the Philippines, this means shifting from a punitive “war” narrative to a restorative framework of healing and inclusion.

6.3.6 Preventing Recurrence

Finally, true accountability must guarantee non-recurrence. This requires structural reforms:

- Police reform: strengthening civilian oversight, ending quota-based *tokhang* operations, and revising training curricula to align with human rights standards.
- Judicial independence: shielding courts from political pressure and strengthening prosecutorial integrity.
- Legislative safeguards: passing laws prohibiting future drug war-style campaigns without parliamentary approval and judicial oversight.

Without these reforms, the cycle of state violence risks repeating under future administrations.

7. CONCLUSION

Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's term represents a controversial and turbulent chapter in the history of Philippine politics. His rise to power was supported by public demand for a strong leader who promised to address drugs and crime. His cultivated "strongman" political persona that he displayed resonated with those who wanted a change in the government and a feeling of safety and security from rampant criminality. However, in the process of executing this promise, thousands of individuals were killed by the police without due process, and the victims were disproportionately from poor and marginalised communities.

Through *Oplan Tokhang* and the subsequent "war on drugs" policies, the lines between vigilante justice and law and enforcement blurred, as extrajudicial killings were carried out under the notion that the victims fought back against the police. Given the widespread violence and high rate of death tolls, the victims' families were left devastated and had little recourse through domestic law enforcement. Due to the gravity of the human rights violations in the Philippines, this situation had caught the attention of international human rights organisations, which demanded justice and accountability.

The arrest of Duterte by the ICC early this year demonstrates how international law strives to hold a former head of state accountable for crimes against humanity. For the families of the victims, this arrest also represents potential vindication for their suffering, which was denied to them by the domestic legal system. Nevertheless, while the case with the ICC remains fraught with challenges, with Duterte's defence team originally seeking to disqualify ICC Prosecutor Kharim Khan from pursuing the case (Serquiña, 2025), the subsequent proceedings will test the ability of the ICC to resolve this important issue.

These proceedings mark a significant turn where the global community will see how international bodies can address and effectively use international law rules to fight against impunity, to uphold justice, and to hold political leaders accountable for state-sanctioned violence, especially when national institutions fail to provide a proper remedy.

Looking ahead, there is a need to strengthen reforms to prevent abuses of power by political authorities to prevent abuses from happening domestically. There is also a need to provide reparation mechanisms for victims and to provide support to victims' families and affected communities. This is a challenge that the Philippines cannot tackle alone, and will require CSOs, both locally and internationally, to keep advocating for transparency and justice. As the world watches this case, there is hope that international human rights will be upheld and that justice will be served for the victims.

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