



# FIND

## **Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance**

*NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations*

### **THE PROTECTION OF HRDS IS CRUCIAL TO THE PROMOTION AND FULFILMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS! A Position Paper of the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND), Inc. re: House Bill No. 77**

To defend human rights is inherently human. The promotion and fulfilment of human rights in the country involves the empowerment of the people in defense of human rights and the rule of law. The Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND) is driven by its steadfast search for truth and justice for the thousands of principled and committed activists who have been forcibly disappeared through decades, thus transforming family members of the disappeared to become human rights defenders (HRDs) themselves.

FIND strongly urges the government to enact and fully implement a Human Rights Defenders Protection law to attend to these victim-families in their long-drawn search for truth and elusive justice. In fact, HRDs and organizations dedicated to ending enforced disappearances and other human rights violations need to be protected.

FIND strongly endorses House Bill No. 77 introduced by Rep. Edcel Lagman for the following reasons:

#### 1. The Human Rights Defender

With the constant threat to the freedom of HRDs working towards the fight against human rights violations, defining their rights and freedoms provides them with unhindered access to the communication and cooperation with international human rights bodies and mechanisms.

Such bill is expected to pave the way for the empowerment of HRDs in doing their work without the constant threat of reprisal. Following this, the bill is seen to lead HRDs towards a more democratic civic space in which they can continue to denounce and take action against human rights violations.

#### 2. On the fight against misinformation regarding human rights

The past Duterte administration has publicly demonized human rights with his hardline stance against his critics and dissenters, creating a public perception and spreading disinformation on the severity of the human rights crisis in the country.

The proposed bill is expected to realign the public's perception on the true concept of human rights and shine light on the very indispensable role of HRDs in the country's development.

#### 3. Human Rights Education

Sec. 39 of House Bill No. 77 specifies the Obligation of the State and Public Authorities to promote and facilitate human rights education. The inclusion of human rights in the country's education curriculum in all academic institutions is a significant step towards further emphasizing the value of human rights and the state's role in its promotion and fulfilment.

4. On strengthening the role of Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in upholding the state's mandate of promoting human rights in the country

With the creation of the Human Rights Defenders Committee through House Bill No. 77, an independent collegial body appointed by the CHR will be responsible for promoting the legitimate and important role and work of HRDs. This will, in effect, strengthen the capability of CHR in fulfilling their mandate and responding to the current situation of human rights in the country.

The enactment of a Human Rights Defenders Protection law is long overdue especially considering that the House of Representatives, in both the 17th and 18th Congress, had passed the measure on third reading. The role and work of HRDs become more significant amid the deepening human rights crisis in the country. Yet many are unaware of the HRDs' invaluable contribution to upholding human dignity particularly in these trying times.

Notwithstanding constant vilification, intimidation and reprisal from the State and its duty-bearers, HRDs remain resolute in their avowed commitment to protect and promote human rights. Consequently, they face increased vulnerability to various forms of human rights violations. Hence, the imperative of a strong and effective law that guarantees protection of the rights of HRDs reinforced by legally mandated responsibilities of public authorities to ensure enjoyment of these rights.

FIND urges the House Committee on Human Rights to prioritize and fast-track the approval of this measure not only to respond to the urgent need of HRDs for legal protection; but to break the record of impunity. It took 16 years for the Anti-Disappearance law to be enacted, 22 years for the Anti-Torture Act, while an Anti-Extrajudicial Killing law has yet to be enacted.

FIND hopes that the Philippines would soon join the ranks of Honduras, Mexico, Mongolia and other States that have stepped up in their human rights commitments and enacted human rights defenders protection laws.

PROTECTION, NOT PERSECUTION, OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS!