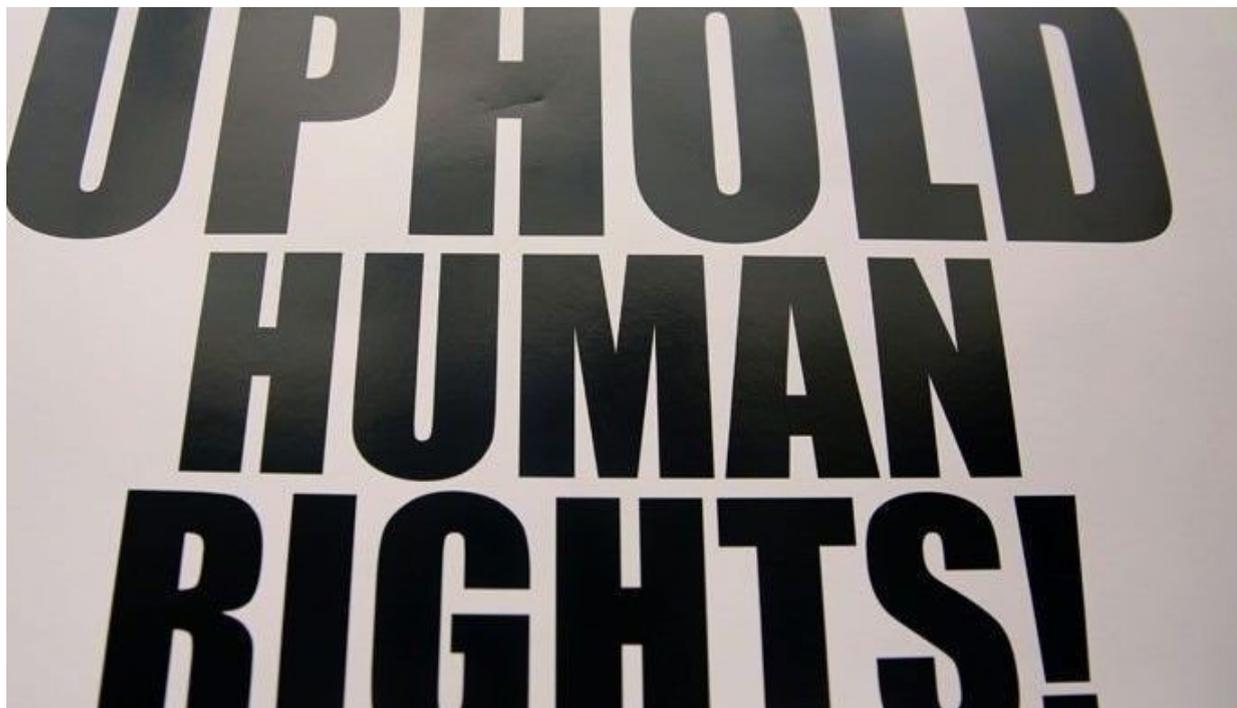


Bill protecting human rights defenders hurdles House panel



This file photo shows a protester holding a placard that says, "Uphold human rights."

The STAR/KJ Rosales, File

MANILA, Philippines — For the third time in nearly two decades, a bill seeking to protect human rights defenders and punish acts of intimidation or violence against them was approved at the committee level at the House of Representatives.

The House human rights committee on Tuesday approved the still-unnumbered bill that would legislate protective measures for Filipino human rights defenders, whose work of promoting peace has been obstructed by the same state-sponsored violence that made them de-facto watchdogs of democracy.

Rep. Edcel Lagman, a co-author of the bill, said that the approved measure was patterned after the principles in the internationally recognized Model Law for the Recognition and Protection of Human Rights Defenders developed by the International Service for Human Rights.

“The emergence of human rights defenders is both an indictment and a symptom of the failure and neglect of the government to fully protect, promote, and fulfill human rights,” Lagman said.

The minority lawmaker added that human rights defenders are “surrogate defenders” due to the government’s apparent failure to fulfill its duty of protecting Filipinos’ human rights.

Two earlier versions of the measure hurdled final reading during the 17th and 18th Congress.

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Rep. Arlene Brosas (Gabriela Women’s Party) said that a law protecting human rights defenders is a necessary fixture in a country where human rights violations are rampant and rights protectors fall victim to “red-

tagging, vilification, surveillance, and filing of trumped-up charges.”

Brosas cited the Anti-Terrorism Act, among other laws and government orders, as an example of a measure that has been used to conduct “brutal crackdowns against activists and human rights defenders.”

Human rights group Karapatan registered its support for the bill through a statement calling for its speedy passage.

“Since 2007, when the earliest version of the bill was filed, this is the third time that the proposed measure passed at the House committee level. We hope that for the third time, this version by Lagman and the Makabayan representatives will be approved by the current congress,” the group said.

Karapatan also called on Senate lawmakers to file a similar bill at the upper chamber of Congress as the measure is “long overdue, with scores of human rights defenders killed, threatened, harassed, arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout years.”

“We likewise caution against attempts to water down the bill - we can never accept versions that will seek to further undermine rights and freedoms,” the group said.

While state agents of the National Task Force to End Local Armed Conflict have deemed protective measures for rights defenders [flawed and unconstitutional](#), the Commission on Human Rights has expressed its support for the measure to protect activists and members of advocacy groups from red-tagging and other means of repressing dissent.

More than 30 member-states of the United Nations Human Rights Council have urged the Philippine government to investigate all cases of extra-judicial killing and human rights abuses during former President Rodrigo Duterte's term, which was marked by rampant killings tied to his anti-illegal drug campaign.