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Outcry in Philippines over general's 'warning' to female celebrities

Accusing a women's rights group of ties to Communist rebels, the general told an actress she could be killed if she associated with the organization.

By Jason Gutierrez

The New York Times (23.10.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/31RKvRt> - The 22-year-old actress's voice broke last week as she talked about being threatened online with rape. She said she worried about the environment that her young nieces would grow up in, and called for creating "a better future for everyone."

This week, a Philippine general said that unless she changed her ways, she could end up dead.

The general, Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade — the de facto head of a military task force fighting a long-running Communist insurgency in the Philippines — directed his criticism not at the remarks made by the actress, Liza Soberano, but at the forum where she made them: an online discussion on the rights of women and girls organized by the youth wing of Gabriela, a women's rights group that the military claims is tied to Communist guerrillas. (Gabriela denies the accusation.)

"Liza Soberano, there's still a chance to abdicate that group," General Parlade said on Facebook. Otherwise, he said, she would "suffer the same fate" as Josephine Ann Lapira, a young activist who was killed in a 2017 battle between the military and the Communist rebels, the New People's Army.

The general's comments led to an outcry from social media users, liberal politicians and the Commission on Human Rights, an independent government body.

"Coming from a high-ranking military official, such a statement is a form of suppression and restriction that serves to dissuade those who speak up for their beliefs and advocacies," a member of the rights commission, Gwendolyn Pimentel-Gana, said on Friday.

A lawyer for Ms. Soberano, Jun Lim, said that the actress was "apolitical," and accused General Parlade of "red-tagging" her — that is, accusing her of being a Communist. "Expressing her love and respect for women and children is her personal advocacy," Mr. Lim said.

General Parlade denied implying that Ms. Soberano was a Communist, saying that he had meant only to warn her against associating with militants. He said he supported women's rights.

But some of the general's critics said his comments reflected a hostility toward women that is prevalent in President Rodrigo Duterte's government.

In his Facebook remarks, General Parlade also warned another Filipina celebrity — Catriona Gray, who won the Miss Universe pageant in 2018 — against associating with left-leaning activist groups. And he accused Angel Locsin, an outspoken actress, of being involved with the rebels.

Ms. Gray, in particular, has been vocal about the government's crackdown on human rights organizations and its passage of a contentious antiterrorism law that rights groups say was designed to stifle opposition voices.

"To Liza and Catriona: It is difficult and painful to be at the front lines fighting beside persons oppressed by a norm that advocates rape, murder and exploitation," Senator Risa Hontiveros said by telephone.

"We will be monitoring him from now on," Senator Hontiveros said of General Parlade. "He should not use his power as a general and threaten these women."

Mr. Duterte, a self-confessed womanizer, has been repeatedly accused of misogyny. He once joked about the gang rape of an Australian missionary during a prison riot in the southern Philippines, saying that he should have been allowed to participate.

The New People's Army, the armed wing of the country's Communist Party, has been waging guerrilla warfare since 1969. Mr. Duterte, who calls himself a leftist and who once studied under the party's founder, Jose Maria Sison, wooed the rebels to the negotiating table soon after taking office and had hoped to complete a peace deal before stepping down in 2022.

But the relationship soured, with the rebels and the military accusing each other of continuing to foment violence. Mr. Duterte scrapped the peace talks and said he would resume them only if Mr. Sison returned to the Philippines from self-imposed exile in the Netherlands.

Gabriela, the country's most prominent women's rights organization, has denied having ties to the Communist Party or the rebels. Arlene Brosas, a Philippine lawmaker who is a member of Gabriela, said the military was using a "rehashed script" to attack the group.

"Our 20 years of advancing women and children's rights inside and outside of Congress cannot be smeared by their repeated lies," she said.

Ms. Soberano is a popular film and television actress whose breakthrough came with "Forevermore," a soap opera on the ABS-CBN network. On Friday, ABS-CBN issued statements in support of both Ms. Soberano and Ms. Locsin, who also appears on the network.

In the online discussion last week, Ms. Soberano became emotional as she talked about supportive messages she had received from women after filing a criminal complaint against someone alleged to have posted a rape threat against her on social media.

"I cried when they sent me those messages," she said, "because I didn't realize how many women were struggling to stand up for themselves."

Duterte officially endorsed sex tourism, trafficking in Boracay during State of the Nation Address

By Rosette Adel

Philstar (24.07.2019) - <http://bit.ly/30Siiag> - lawmaker from a women's party-list Tuesday said President Rodrigo Duterte formally advertised sex tourism, trafficking and prostitution in Boracay in his fourth State of the Nation Address speech.

"Duterte's Boracay rehabilitation program created thousands of unemployed, impoverished Aklanon women now increasingly vulnerable to prostitution, human trafficking and abuse," Gabriela Women's Party Rep. Arlene Brosas said.

"Duterte in his SONA officially endorsed sex tourism, trafficking and prostitution in Boracay," she added.

Brosas said this after Duterte last Monday mentioned the rehabilitation of Boracay.

The president, in his speech, boasted about the restoration that occurred on the island.

He said the government "equipped with political will" ordered the closure of the world-famed tourist destination for six months to prevent its "further deterioration."

"I am proud to say that it has been restored close to its original pristine state," Duterte said.

Duterte, however, said Boracay is just the beginning while adding commentary about the women on the island waiting for foreign male visitors as he invited them to visit Boracay.

"Boracay Island is just the beginning. And the girls there, the foreigners are waiting for you gentlemen to visit the place. They are all on the beach sunbathing. You are invited to --- I have not been there," he said in his SONA.

The remark was deemed sexist by some.

In January last year, during his last day in India, Duterte also joked that he would like to lure tourists to the Philippines with virgins.

Duterte said that Islamic State extremists lure followers with the promise of "42 virgins" in heaven as he addressed the Filipino and Indian businessmen present then.

'No to leading by example'

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, the Center For Women's Resources raised the danger of Duterte's call during his SONA about leading by example as it could mean "following his misogynistic attitude, which made it worse for women."

"I implore those who occupy positions of power and authority, to let your deeds and accomplishments do the talking. Lead by example. Words ring hollow when not followed by positive and prioritized action," Duterte said Monday in his speech.

The CWR cited that that violence against women has continued, as one woman or girl is raped every hour.

"Worse, state-perpetrated VAW has become rampant. Since President Duterte became the president, more than 50 cops were involved in various cases of violence against women," CWR said.

Duterte has been previously criticized for casually talking about rape and abuse on women.

His remarks were, however, often been explained by the Palace as jokes and as part of what makes him endearing to the people.

Philippines president cracks rape joke, outrage ensues

By Kathleen Joyce, Fox News

New York Post (31.08.2018) - <https://nyp.st/2xbl6BY> - Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was criticized by women's rights groups after he allegedly made a joke linking the high rape crime rate in the southern city of Davao to the number of "beautiful women" living there.

Duterte made the quip while delivering a speech Thursday in Davao, the city where he was once mayor, Al Jazeera reported.

"They said there are many rape cases in Davao," he said. "As long as there are many beautiful women, there will be more rape cases."

The president's comments were immediately criticized by women's rights activists and groups.

"Duterte seems to hate women so much that he comes up with statements that help normalize rape," Elizabeth Angsioco, a women's rights activist, told Al Jazeera. "This is unacceptable. Not from anyone, especially not from the highest official of the land."

"Instead of seriously addressing the problem, the misogynist Duterte has added insult to the scars of rape survivors," women's rights group #BabaeAko (I Am Woman) said in a statement.

Gabriela, a Philippines women's rights network, released a statement regarding Duterte's comments.

"Yet again, President Duterte sends a very dangerous and distorted message in his latest rape remark, that a woman's beauty is a cause of rape," the statement read.

"He toys with Davao pride and misogyny to gloss over a very important detail that women in his hometown of Davao City suffered the most number of rape cases in the country. This latest theatric only confirms one thing: President Duterte is proud to have rolled back whatever gains and legal mechanisms that have been instituted for women's rights in Davao City," the statement concluded.

Duterte's spokesman, Harry Roque, released a statement regarding the president's comments, saying people should not "give too much weight on what the president says by way of a joke."

"They're not OK with rape jokes but let's just say that perhaps the standard of what is offensive and what is not offensive is more liberal in the south," Roque told The New York Times.

This is not the first time Duterte has come under criticism for his comments about women. He called his daughter a "drama queen" when she revealed she was a victim of sexual assault. In February, he bragged that he ordered troops to shoot female communist fighters in their vaginas, according to multiple reports.

Filipino women struggle for birth control

Malaysian Digest (15.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mrGJHN> - Philippine President Duterte wants more Filipino women to have access to contraceptives, which reportedly will run out in the Philippines by 2020 unless a Supreme Court order is overturned. Ana P. Santos reports.

In January, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte issued an executive order calling for the full implementation of the so-called Reproductive Health Law that would give an estimated 6 million women in need access to birth control. According to government data, an estimated 2 million of those women are poor and require government assistance to access contraceptives.

But unless the Supreme Court lifts its temporary restraining order (TRO) on the registration of contraceptives, the Philippines may run out by 2020.

"Of course, we welcome the president's support, but it is not enough," Romeo Dongeto, head of advocacy group Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD), told DW.

In 2015, the Philippine Supreme Court issued the TRO preventing the Department of Health (DOH) from procuring, selling and distributing the contraceptive implant, Implanon. The order was issued in response to a petition filed by anti-abortion groups that claimed it caused abortions.

When the DOH appealed for the lifting of the order, the Supreme Court rejected the motion and in August 2016 effectively expanded its effect when it put the renewal of licenses on hold for other contraceptives.

"To date, the most serious challenge to the implementation of the Reproductive Health Law is the Supreme Court's temporary restraining order, which would result in contraceptive stock-out in the country if it remains unsolved, affecting more than 13 million Filipino women," said Dongeto.

A presidential executive order cannot overturn the Supreme Court order as the executive and judicial are equal branches of government.

Public health emergency

The imposition of the TRO for more than 18 months has had a drastic effect on reproductive health and government health officials warned that if it remains in force, the increasing number of unplanned pregnancies and maternal deaths could reach the scale of a public health emergency.

"Since 2015, when the TRO was first imposed, we estimate that half a million unintended pregnancies have occurred," Juan Antonio Perez, executive director of the Commission on Population (POPCOM), said at a press conference.

Based on the Philippines' current maternal mortality ratios, POPCOM projects that these pregnancies will result in 1,000 maternal deaths every year.

"That is the equivalent of three jumbo jets of pregnant women dying every year," said Perez. "It would be equivalent to a public health emergency if the Supreme Court does not lift its TRO."

According to a United Nations report, the Philippines topped the regional list of Asian countries with high numbers of teen pregnancies. Globally, teen pregnancy rates have declined over the past two decades, except in the Philippines.

Gradual decrease in supply

Despite efforts by both public and private healthcare providers, the Philippines faces a worsening atmosphere for expectant mothers. According to 2012 government figures, 220 out of 100,000 Filipino women died during their pregnancy, a considerable increase from two years earlier. Health workers attribute that statistic in part to multiple births by one woman, within short periods of time.

At one of Likhaan's clinics in the Tonsuya slum of northern Manila, 19-year old Jessa, tells the story of her mother, who died last year during childbirth.

"It was the 11th time she was pregnant," Jessa says, while wiping back tears. "She went into labor at home, but something went wrong. My father took her to the hospital, but it was too late. The baby died too."

Jessa says she first came to the clinic for prenatal care because she was afraid that she too might die during her own pregnancy. She thinks that birth control could have saved her mother's life.

Opposition continues

When the new law takes effect on March 31st, it will be the culmination of a nearly 16-year long battle, between health advocates and the Catholic Church and their respective sympathizers in the Philippines parliament. The Archdiocese of Manila has been an outspoken critic of the legislation, claiming that it will encourage promiscuity and lead to more out of wedlock pregnancies.

For many of the church's supporters, the fight for moral control of the Philippines isn't over yet. Some Catholic-affiliated groups have even gone as far as to petition the nation's Supreme Court to repeal the law.

Melgar isn't bothered by the continued opposition. She's confident that now that family planning is a legally protected right, it's here to stay.

"There are elements here that will forever ideologically and politically oppose reproductive rights," she says.

For now, Melgar says Likhaan and her clinics will work to educate young women about their rights and also tackle other pressing gender issues, like domestic violence.