

## KILLINGS OF DRUG SUSPECTS RISE TO 525 IN THE PHILIPPINES

**MANILA:** The number of suspected drug dealers killed in Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's crackdown has risen to more than 500 in just over a month, police said yesterday, in an alarming campaign that sparked protests and plans for a Senate investigation. Since July 1, 525 drug suspects have been killed in clashes with police while more than 7,600 suspects have been arrested in more than 5,400 anti-narcotics assaults, the national police's Directorate for Investigation and Detective Management said in a report. More than half a million have surrendered to authorities, according to police.

Some local news agencies have reported considerably higher death tolls, some as high as nearly 1,000, in counts that included drug suspects killed by unidentified attackers since Duterte emerged as the president-elect following the May 9 elections.

Police officials say those killed had put up a fight, although critics argue that circumstances indicate many of the suspects were illegally killed or died because police did not follow established procedures in dealing with crime suspects. Left-wing activists protested at several schools against the killings and Duterte's threat to place the country

under martial law if the Supreme Court attempted to block his fight against crime, specifically illegal drugs which he said has worsened into a pandemic.

"Human rights have been sacrificed in the conduct of the anti-drug drive, with those holding the gun assuming the roles of both accusers and executioners," left-wing protest leader Vencer Crisostomo said. "It is impossible to ascertain innocence or guilt if the accused are simply shot on the spot." "The Duterte regime's war on drugs is bound to fail if it continues to rely on extrajudicial killings led by a corrupt and abusive police and military hierarchy, Crisostomo said, adding that the illegal drug trade is a symptom of deeper social problems, like rising poverty, joblessness and hunger, "which cannot be wiped out by bullets alone." The crackdown involves testing policemen nationwide if they have used illegal drugs and the report said 116 of 75,848 policemen have tested positive and were being investigated and would face possible charges and dismissal from the force.

Sen. Leila de Lima said the Senate's committee on justice and human rights, which she heads, would start an investigation into the killings on Aug. 22. Duterte's political allies in Congress have



**MANILA:** Filipino student activists shout slogans as they call for justice for victims of extrajudicial killings during a rally at the University of the Philippines yesterday. —AP

tried to block the planned investigation. Duterte built a name as a crimebusting mayor of southern Davao city. During the presidential campaign and after taking office, he has openly threatened drug dealers and other criminals with death and has called for restoring the death penalty - by hanging because he

says he didn't want to waste electricity on outlaws.

Duterte has encouraged law enforcers to go hard on criminals and has assured them he would back them up and pardon them if they are convicted of committing human rights violations while battling criminals. —AP



**YANGON:** This long-exposure photograph taken before dawn on August 9, 2016 shows lighting from heavy rain clouds. —AFP

## MYANMAR SOLDIERS ADMIT AT COURT TO KILLING VILLAGERS

**YANGON:** Seven Myanmar soldiers on trial for murder have admitted their involvement in the killing of five villagers in northern Shan State, according to witnesses at an unprecedented court martial. In a highly unusual move, the army invited 15 residents from the remote village of Mong Yaw, where the killings took place, to witness the court martial at a nearby military base on Tuesday. Four of them have described the proceedings to Reuters.

"The judge read the murder case reports and asked for confessions from the soldiers, who admitted they were responsible," said Sai Kaung Kham, a Mong Yaw villager who has been helping the families attending the military trial.

Military officials did not respond to requests for comment, and it was not possible to independently verify the testimony at the closed proceedings in the northern city of Lashio.

In July, in a rare public admission of wrongdoing by the still-powerful military, intelligence chief Mya Tun Oo told reporters the army was responsible for killing five men from Mong Yaw and said the culprits would be prosecuted.

Witnesses had previously told Reuters that soldiers rounded up dozens of men from the village, in an area riven by a long-running ethnic insurgency, on June 25 and led five away. Their bodies were found in a shallow grave a few days later.

Both the news conference by one of the country's most senior generals and the invitation to villagers to attend the military trial were unprecedented. — Reuters

## BROKEN GLASS AND PROMISES A YEAR AFTER TIANJIN BLASTS

**TIANJIN:** Surrounded by countless broken windows, gutted offices and mountains of cigarette butts, Qin Tao is trying to rebuild his life and business a year after giant explosions rocked the Chinese city of Tianjin. At least 165 people were killed in the blast, which devastated a swathe of the northern port, and 12 months on much of his office building-around a kilometer away from the epicentre-looks almost the same as it did a day afterwards. "First the neighborhood officials came and took notes and pictures, then the district government officials came and did the same, then the police and then city officials," said Qin, 36. "But still I haven't heard anything, nothing has been done."

In the late hours of last August 12, a fire broke out at a chemical warehouse owned by Rui Hai International Logistics. When it exploded it sent a monumental fireball soaring towards the heavens, mangling structures kilometers away-captured by social media users in what rapidly became the country's highest-profile industrial accident in years. Fears of toxic pollution were rife, with cyanide levels in the disaster zone far above national limits, and it took several days before a visit by Premier Li Keqiang-normally among the second wave of responders in China's official choreography for disasters.

In the aftermath, officials pledged to convert the blast site to a park and renovate the area, part of Tianjin's free trade zone that Chinese officials were promoting in Europe last month. But a year later the blast site is still inaccessible, with a temporary blue metal wall ringing the perimeter. Patrolling police prevented journalists getting a closer look, with a SWAT car parked on a highway over-

looking the area to discourage anyone from stopping. A brand new school next to the site sat empty and businesses were dark and locked, occasional groups of migrant workers the only signs of civilian life on the streets.

### Plunged into debt

Before the explosions, Qin was preparing to open a logistics company, finally achieving the Chinese dream of becoming his own boss. Unlike most businesses, he and his fellow tenants at the Fortune World Trade Center bought their offices, which are now rendered worthless. They mounted a protest in May, hanging giant five-storey-high banners on a tower declaring: "Injustice! We are still waiting for a resolution, what a tragedy". Police took them down within hours, but there was no official

response. "I've plunged into debt since the government won't help us," Qin said. "I'm still paying off the loan from when I bought the office, but we never even started business, there's nothing I can do but hope to be saved." Those whose homes were close to the blast site have fared marginally better. Authorities offered homeowners of one compound roughly 800 metres from the epicentre a government buy-back of their flats or funding for repairs. But the sums on offer were not enough for either, according to Wei, a resident who would only give her surname. "The price the government offered to buy the homes was too low, it wasn't enough to buy another apartment in the city," she told AFP. Many chose the repair option, she said, but the compensation only covered about 10 percent of her costs. — AFP



**TIANJIN:** This file photo taken on August 13, 2015 shows smoke billowing behind rows of burnt out cars at the site of a series of explosions. —AFP