

PHILIPPINES

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UN official listed by Duterte as 'terrorist' irks Manila

Duterte strong president, not authoritarian, he respects all branches of government

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GULF NEWS 

Manila: A senior Philippine government official has hit back at a United Nations rapporteur, who is also a Filipina, for describing President Rodrigo Duterte as authoritarian.

President Rodrigo Duterte is a strong leader, not an authoritarian, because he respects all branches of government, executive secretary Salvador Medialdea said.

"The remarks of UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz [at the Human Rights Festival in Milan on March 25] show how detached she is from the realities happening in the Philippines," Medialdea said.

"The executive branch respects the separation of powers and the independence of the other co-equal branches and doesn't meddle with their affairs. Democracy in the Philippines is vibrant and strong," Medialdea added.

The Philippine government official said Tauli-Corpuz was added to the government's list of alleged terrorists, based on information that she was a former member of the 50-year old Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New Peoples' Army (CPP-NPA), which the government also wanted a court to declare a terror group.

In a speech in Milan, Tauli-Corpuz said the government "controls" the legislature, and this was the reason why Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno was being impeached in the House of Representative and could soon face impeachment trial at the Senate.

Duterte has become "very authoritarian," Tauli-Corpuz said, citing his alleged control of the judiciary was the reason why Senator Leila de Lima was imprisoned in February 2017.

Sereno was charged with alleged corruption and disregard for proper court procedure, government authorities said, adding De Lima allegedly supported drug lords— when she was Justice Secretary from 2010 to 2016 — by allowing them to continue operating the illegal drug trade while at the National Penitentiary.

In February, the Justice Department asked a court to declare 600 individuals, including Tauli-Corpuz, as terrorists over their alleged CPP-NPA links.

Duterte ended in November peace talks with the National Democratic Front, (the negotiating arm of the CPP NPA since talks began in 1992) because of NPA's continuous attacks on police and military men.

In reaction, Tauli-Corpuz said on March 10, "The charges are entirely baseless and malicious. The government sees this (petition) as an opportunity to pursue people they don't like. I am worried for my safety and the safety of others on the list, including several rights activists."

Her inclusion in the "terror list" was revealed after she criticised Duterte in December 2017, saying the martial law rule and military operations in Mindanao, southern Philippines have displaced thousands of indigenous people. She was a former leader of the Kankanaey Igorot, one of indigenous groups in northern Cordillera, before she joined the UN in 2014.

The justice department's list of alleged terrorists also included CPP-NPA founder Jose Maria Sison and Luis Jalandoni, of the NDF. Sison and Jalandoni are based in the Netherlands. Sison was Duterte's professor at Manila's Lyceum University in the 70s. They were friends, but have been exchanging pointed attacks since the government-NDF peace talks ended last year. Also in the list were 17 CPP-NPA members and former congressman Satur Ocampo of Bayan, a leftist sectoral party at the House of Representatives.

Authorities could monitor closely, trace the sources of funds, and restrict access to funds of groups or individuals with a terror tag, experts said.

In July, Duterte freed communist leaders, appointed leftists in his cabinet in efforts to forge a political settlement with the NDF. More than 40,000 people have been killed in CPP-NPA's armed struggle. Peace talks between the government and the NDF began in 1992. Norway began to broker the talks in 1986.