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Philippines

# Under Duterte, 'The Punisher,' Death Toll Continues to Soar

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**As many as 1,900 people**—or about 36 per day—**have been killed** in the seven weeks since the tough-talking Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte took office, promising a [crackdown on drugs](#), the country's national police chief said Tuesday.

Director-General Ronald dela Rosa told a Senate hearing there was no declared policy to kill drug users and pushers and that about 1,100 deaths were still being investigated.

"We are not butchers," he said.

The rest of the dead, he said, were confirmed slain as a result of police anti-narcotics operations, dela Rosa said.

"This has a chilling effect," said Senator Frank Drilon after the police chief's deposition. "We are all concerned about the number of deaths, by any language this is alarming."

Duterte, nicknamed "the Punisher," [remains popular](#) despite allegations of human rights abuses. The former mayor of a southern Philippines city promised to rid the country of its illegal drug woes, and in his inaugural address, invited vigilantes and rebel guerilla factions to single out, and kill drug dealers of their own volition.

The inquiry into the deaths, is led by a staunch critic of the president, Senator Leila de Lima, who has summoned top police and anti-narcotics officials to explain the "unprecedented" rise in the body count and reports of vigilante killings.

Duterte has warned legislators not to interfere with his campaign, saying they could be killed if they blocked efforts aimed at improving the country.

Nearly 700,000 drug users and drug peddlers have turned themselves in to escape the crackdown, police chief dela Rosa said. He said there was a decrease in overall crime, although murders and homicides had increased.

Outside the Senate building, dozens of supporters cheered dela Rosa for leading the war against drugs, chanting his nickname, "Bato, Bato."

Some carried placards reading: "We are with you Bato in the fight against drugs."

The United States, a close ally of the Philippines, said overnight it was "deeply concerned" by the reports of the killings and the State Department urged Duterte's government to abide by human rights norms.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said the United States and European Union members "should make it clear to Duterte that inciting such violence is unacceptable and will reap potentially severe diplomatic and economic costs."

"Otherwise, it's hard to envision when these killings will end," it said.

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The number of those killed provided by dela Rosa at the Senate hearing was higher than the 1,800 he gave at the hearing on Monday. He gave no explanation for the higher number but said the figures were updated.

Dela Rosa said about 750 of the dead were killed in police operations against drug peddlers. The other deaths were being investigated, he said.

"Not all deaths under investigation are drug-related," dela Rosa said, adding that 40 killings were known to be due to enmity or robbery.

He also said about 300 of his officers were suspected to be involved in the drugs trade, warning these personnel will be sacked and charged in court if found guilty.

There has been speculation in the local media that some of the killings were carried out by corrupt police officers who were wiping out drug peddlers to avoid exposure.

[Telesur](#)