

Sites identified with Maoist group ordered shut

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SCREENGRAB OF BULATLAT
FACEBOOK PAGE

THE PHILIPPINES' telecommunication regulator has ordered local internet service providers to block the websites of groups identified with the Maoist movement.

The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) ordered the "immediate blocking of the reported websites found to be affiliated to and are supporting terrorists and terrorist organizations," NTC Commissioner Gamaliel A. Cordoba said in the June 8 memo.

The order was issued upon the request of Hermogenes C. Esperon, Jr., the national security adviser of President Rodrigo R. Duterte.

Mr. Esperon on June 6 asked the NTC to order internet service providers to block access to 26 websites "affiliated to and are supporting" the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), New People's Army (NPA) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

The Anti-Terrorism Council has labeled them terrorist groups.

The websites of alternative media Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly, which have been reporting on grassroots situations, were among those listed by Mr. Esperon in his letter.

"Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly have existed for years and have built a track record of reporting on people's issues," the National Union of Journalists said in a statement on Wednesday. "Sometimes, that reporting has been critical of government and its policies, but it is dangerous to equate this with affiliation or support that the government now claims."

Blocking access to these sites leave a gap in discourse and in the flow of information, it added.

It also said the NTC order showed the threats posed by a 2020 anti-terrorism law to freedom of expression and of the press. "What we feared, and what the government assured would not happen, has happened."

The list also includes the website of fisherfolk group Pamalakaya and Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, which are among Mr. Duterte's fiercest critics.

The websites of Pamalakaya, Bulatlat, and Bayan were still inaccessible as of writing.

"If any should feel aggrieved by any perceived improper use or application of any provisions of the Anti-Terrorism ACT, including the provisions on designation, there are remedies under the law," Justice Undersecretary Adrian F. Sugay told reporters in a Viber message. "Judicial recourse is always available."

Bulatlat rejected its inclusion in the list released by the NTC and endorsed by Mr. Esperon, calling it a violation of its right to publish and freedom of expression.

"Since June 17, our subscribers using Smart/PLDT as their ISP informed us that they cannot access our website, prompting us to reach out to the IT company to inquire about the incident," it said in a statement.

PRESS FREEDOM

Bulatlat, which considers itself as the longest-running online media outfit and the authority on human rights reporting in the Philippines, asked: "Why are the powers that be so afraid of our truth-telling?"

Bayan called the blocking a “blatant attack” on free speech. “The orders show how arbitrary the use of terrorist-labeling and red-tagging have become,” it said in a statement. “The orders to block certain websites are devoid of any due process and rely merely on guilt by association.”

Bayan said it was not among those designated as “terrorists” by the council. “Even if designated, there is nothing in the law that says you can block access to websites.”

It added that no specific offense or evidence had been cited to justify the blocking the websites. “This again highlights the dangers of the anti-Terror Law.”

Bayan, which vowed to question the order before the courts, urged telecommunication companies to reject it.

It urged Clarita A. Carlos, the next national security adviser, to “revoke these illegal orders and to cease attacks on free speech and freedom of association.”

“We call on the media, free speech advocates and opponents of the ‘terror law’ to stand together and push back against this latest attack.”

Meanwhile, international group Human Rights Watch urged the oversight committees of the Philippine Congress to take another look at the way the 2020 law on terror was being misused.

“The NTC should refuse this attempt by the National Security Council to use it for political ends,” it said in a statement. “The NTC should make sure that press freedom and freedom of expression online is upheld and respected.”

The global rights watchdog also called on civil society and the international community, including United Nations agencies and donor governments like the European Union, to “publicly condemn this latest attempt to suppress freedom of expression in the Philippines.”

The Anti-Terrorism bill was signed into law on July 3, 2020, and took effect after 15 days.

The Supreme Court, which heard four-dozen petitions seeking to void the law, scrapped two clauses — one that would have criminalized protests deemed by authorities as harmful and another that would have allowed the Anti-Terrorism Council to adopt bans by supranational authorities.

