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Dear Police Brigadier General Montejo,

I am writing to express my concern about the use of force to disperse a peaceful protest and the charges against 21 residents of San Roque village, Quezon City. On 1 April, residents gathered on a road where a private company was supposed to distribute aid. When this did not happen, they decided to peacefully protest to call for government aid. Since the implementation of a community quarantine on 17 March to address the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Filipinos have been unable to earn a living.

Community leaders said residents and bystanders were violently dispersed by the police who hit them with wooden sticks. A man and his child who were not protesting but were in the area were injured. Following the dispersal, 21 individuals were arrested and detained for five days before being released on bail.

Those arrested face various charges, including “unlawful assembly” and “non-cooperation in a health emergency”, with combined penalties of up to 20 months in jail and fines of over PhP 1.1 million (USD 22,000) each. Amnesty International calls on governments not to imprison people solely for breaching public health restrictions, which is a disproportionate measure in the current context. The charges are contrary to international human rights law or carry penalties with a disproportionate impact on them.

It is alarming that Philippine authorities have responded to the resident’s pleas with violence, detention and potential criminal penalties. A community kitchen set up in San Roque by a local group for the resident’s daily food needs has also been dismantled by the police and prevented from continuing, as it was supposedly in violation of the government’s quarantine orders in relation to gatherings of groups.

Therefore, I call on your office to:

- Drop all charges against the 21 residents of San Roque village, as the charges are either contrary to international human rights law or carry penalties that will disproportionately affect this group;
- Launch a prompt, independent and impartial investigation into the police’s use of force, which may amount to torture or other ill-treatment, and bring anyone responsible to justice in a fair trial; and
- Ensure that all residents of San Roque have prompt and adequate access to food, medicines and other basic needs, and are empowered and supported to comply with the community quarantine.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Yours sincerely,