STATEMENT ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE VICTIMS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES (IDD), 30 AUGUST 2020

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) observes the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances (IDD) standing in solidarity with the families of the disappeared who are among the hardest hit by the global health crisis.

Years after the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on Enforced Disappearance and the entry into force of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED), the egregious practice that violates practically all human rights persists globally.

Enforced disappearance is particularly challenging to women. Already agonizing from their inability to locate their children or their husbands, mothers and wives of the disappeared also reel from the multi-burdens of solo parenting compounded by stigmatization, harassment, reprisal or apathy from government. They now confront graver difficulties amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Governments take advantage of public health emergency measures backed by repressive laws and executive issuances to curtail freedoms of movement, speech, peaceful assembly and association. Penalties for violations of community quarantine protocols and directives are often not compliant with principles of reasonableness, necessity and proportionality. Acts of torture, cruel, inhumane, degrading treatment or punishment are often inflicted on the violators. Some become victims of enforced disappearance as they are arbitrarily apprehended and detained for days, weeks or months with their families completely unaware of their whereabouts. Detained without charges, many are denied of their right to bail.

Unnecessary detention has increased jail congestion to as high as 600%. This exacerbates the spread of the Corona virus among detainees and prisoners, some of whom are unreported and undocumented victims of enforced disappearance.

National security, digital or cybercrime, and anti-terror laws hang like swords of Damocles over the heads of political activists attempting to stage protest rallies. Fearless ones brave the wrath of the police and the military by pushing through with their mass actions wearing face masks and observing social distancing. Arrests before, during and after these mobilizations are not uncommon. Journalists and netizens who
assert their freedom of expression specially those who criticize government’s flawed and ineffective response to the pandemic are likewise arrested and jailed. The less fortunate are extrajudicially killed or disappeared.

Enforced disappearance, torture and other violent assaults on human dignity that targeted indigenous, ethnic and religious communities as well as migrants and stateless persons prior to the COVID-19 pandemic continue to bedevil these marginalized sectors. National security laws and lockdown measures are weaponized against them. The opaque emergency measures restrict not only their movement but the flow of communication that consequently deprives them of relevant information on how to deal with the pandemic.

With or without the COVID-19 pandemic, enforced disappearance is by itself a pandemic – a generally political global affliction that has to be addressed globally by all stakeholders, States in particular. Today, AFAD renews its call for universal accession to the CPED and the domestic criminalization of enforced disappearance buttressed by meaningful and enduring institutional reforms particularly in the justice system.

Let it not be forgotten that if the International Week of the Disappeared (IWD) aims at a seven-day campaign and lobby toward ending enforced disappearance and breaking impunity, the IDD seeks to pay tribute to the disappeared and their families. This day is dedicated to remembering the sterling lives of disappeared heroes and martyrs who inspired, ignited and fueled human rights and resistance movements across continents. This day is a triumph over forgetting which condemns history to repeat its failures and blunders. As we remember the disappeared, we also thank the families who despite the hardships they face continue to fight for the causes – democracy, freedom and development – that their disappeared loved ones fearlessly fought for at the cost of their life and liberty.

Signed by:

Khurram Parvez  
Chairperson

Nilda L. Sevilla  
Secretary-General

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The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) is a regional federation of human rights organizations working toward a world without desaparecidos. AFAD members are based in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kashmir, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. It advocates truth, justice, redress, reparation, and empowerment for the victims and the reconstruction of the historical memory of the disappeared towards the eradication of enforced disappearances.