

16 FEBRUARI 2017

## Duterte's drug war targets kids

THE PHILIPPINES

# DUTERTE'S DRUG WAR TARGETS KIDS

A bill proposes to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 9 years old

MANILA

**B**EFORE Rodrigo Duterte's bloody war on drugs had even begun, allies of the Philippines president were quietly preparing for a wider offensive.

On June 30, as Duterte was sworn in, they introduced a bill into the Philippine Congress that could allow children as young as 9 to be targeted in a crackdown that has since claimed more than 7,600 lives.

The bill proposes to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 9 years old to prevent what it calls "the pampering of youthful offenders who commit crimes knowing they can get away with it".

"You can ask any policeman or anyone connected with law enforcement: we produce a generation of criminals," Duterte said in a speech here on Dec 12.

Young children, he said, were becoming drug runners, thieves and rapists, and must be "taught to understand responsibility".



Boys attending lessons at a drug rehabilitation centre in Bicutan, Manila. REUTERS PIC

The move to target children signals Duterte's determination to intensify his drug war, which faces outrage abroad and growing unease at home.

The president's allies said his support in Congress would ensure the bill passes the House of Representatives by June.

The House would approve the bill "within six months", said Fredenil Castro, who co-authored the legislation with the speaker of the House, Pantaleon Alvarez.

It might face opposition in the Senate, but would prevail because of Duterte's allies there, added Castro.

Lowering the age of criminality was justified, Castro said, because

many children were "in cahoots with drug users, drug pushers and others who are related to the drug trade".

He said he based his support for the bill on what he saw from his car and at churches — children begging and pickpocketing.

"For me, there isn't any evidence more convincing than what I see every day of my life."

A controversial bill to restore the death penalty, another presidential priority, was also expected to pass the House of Representatives by mid-year, said Duterte allies in Congress.

Supporters of the bill to lower the age of criminality said holding young children liable would discourage

drug traffickers from exploiting them.

Opponents, including opposition lawmakers and human rights groups, are appalled at a move they said would harm children without evidence it would reduce crime.

There is also resistance inside Duterte's administration. A member of Duterte's cabinet, who heads the Social Welfare and Development Department, opposes the move.

And, a branch of the police responsible for protecting women and children disputes the claim that children are heavily involved in the drug trade — a claim not supported by official data.

Opponents warned that lowering

the age of criminality would further strain a juvenile justice system that was struggling to cope.

At worst, they said, with a drug war raging nationwide, the bill could legitimise the killing of minors.

"What will stop them from targeting children?" said Karina Teh, a local politician and child rights advocate here. "They are using the war on drugs to criminalise children."

The drug-war death toll includes at least 29 minors, who were either shot by unidentified gunmen or accidentally killed during police operations from July to November last year, according to advocacy groups Children's Legal Rights and Development Center and the Network Against Killings in the Philippines, both based here.

Dela Rosa said the Philippine National Police "fully supports" the new bill.

It was "true and supported by data" that minors were used by drug traffickers because they couldn't be held criminally liable, the police chief said in a submission to the House of Representatives.

Some police officers working on the streets agree with Dela Rosa. In the city's slums, children as young as 6 act as lookouts for dealers, shouting "The enemy is coming!" when police approach, said Cecilio Tomas, an anti-narcotics officer in the city.

By their early teens, some became delivery boys and then dealers and users, said Tomas. **Reuters**