



DAILY NEWS

Ahead of trade talks, Philippines' envoy to the U.S. talking to Democrats about human rights

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The Philippines' ambassador to the U.S., Jose Manuel Romualdez, has been meeting with U.S. lawmakers to address human rights concerns ahead of the start of trade talks between the two countries.

"Right now I'm in the process of meeting with as many members of the U.S. Congress, the Democrats particularly, and trying to give them an idea of exactly what this drug war that President Duterte had promised to the Filipino people when he took office in 2016 is," Romualdez told *Inside U.S. Trade* on Friday at a Meridian Center for Diplomatic Engagement summit.

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative is expected soon to notify Congress of the administration's intent to begin free trade negotiations with the Philippines, among other countries. Sources say USTR had [planned to notify Congress](#) as soon as this week, but was facing pushback from Democratic lawmakers over the Philippines' human rights record.

"As you know we've already indicated that we would like to have a FTA with the United States but it is right now in the, I think as far as the United States, consultations are still going on and so it'll take some time before we really start our negotiations," Romualdez said.

Last month six House Ways and Means Democrats [sent a letter](#) to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer urging the Trump administration not to sign an FTA with the Philippines because of the "shocking human rights abuses" occurring under President Rodrigo Duterte.

"In the Philippines, the drug situation was at its worst just before President Duterte came into the picture because there are many police officers and local officials who were involved in it. But all that has at least changed dramatically over the last year and a half," Romualdez said. "And then most of the police officers who were involved have been either dismissed and are now being charged in court and many of the local officials also are going through the same process."

Human Rights Watch, an international non-governmental organization, issued a [report](#) citing police statistics from the Philippines showing that from July 1 to November 3, 2016, police killed an estimated 1,790 suspected "drug pushers and users." Duterte assumed office on June 30, 2016. The State Department's [2017 Human Rights Report](#), meanwhile, states that "Extrajudicial killings have been the chief human rights concern in the country for many years and, after a sharp rise with the onset of the anti-drug campaign in 2016, they continued in 2017."

Romualdez called those numbers "bloated" and said "we have better figures to show."

"A lot of these so-called human rights issues have been explained on many occasions," the ambassador said.

"This problem of drugs is a worldwide problem," Romualdez added. "Here in the United States you have close to 70,000 people who die every year." The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 72,287 people died from drug overdoses in 2017.

During the signing of the Save Our Seas Act at the White House on Wednesday, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) told President Trump he was working with the president's trade team "on the Philippine trade agreement to make sure this" -- ocean pollution -- "is a part of it." Whitehouse called the Philippines a top offender.

"Philippines up next they're one of the worst three," Whitehouse said.

Romualdez said he thinks sea pollution won't be a big talking point in trade negotiations with the U.S., but added that "In the Philippines we're very much concerned about the environment."

"I think it'll be part of a total picture," Romualdez said. -- *Maria Curi* (mcuri@iwppnews.com)

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