

Welcome Remarks
Iloilo City
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3rd Regional Consultation on the Philippine HR Draft Declaration

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Representative
Fourth Congressional District of Quezon

Chairperson
Philippine Working Group for an ASEAN Human
Rights Mechanism

and

President
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

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FELLOW HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES AND FRIENDS,

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On behalf of the Philippine Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, let me welcome you all to the Third Regional Consultation on the Philippine Human rights Draft Declaration. I am very happy to be here among you all in this beautiful city of Iloilo.

As we meet here today, urgent issues demand our attention in the realm of peace and human rights. The primary issue that confronts every human rights advocate is the continuing armed conflict in Mindanao. The call of MILF leader Hashim Salamat for jihad or holy war following the fall of Camp Abubakar into government hands hurtles our whole country in the precipice of war.

Clearly, the capture of the MILF's main base of Camp Abubakar has neither ensured immediate peace for Mindanao nor decisive victory for the government. If at all, the continuing government offensives in central Mindanao only heralds the opening of a new protracted episode of war as the MILF's combat forces begin to shift from semi-conventional warfare to highly mobile guerrilla warfare. And far from ushering the beginnings of peace, the government's persisting militarist strategy of all-out war further forecloses the very conditions of political stability required by the launching of an economic recovery program for Mindanao.

Everyone of us is affected by the turn of events in our southern backdoor. Key MalacaHang officials are now seeking emergency powers for the President which will impact not only on Mindanao but on our entire nation. The massive military buildup now being undertaken by the Armed Forces of the Philippines ominously foreshadows the resurgence of militarization in the country. Even now, paramilitary recruitment is intensifying in many regions to replace soldiers sent off to Mindanao which can only lead to renewed patterns of human rights abuses.

My friends, these are the burning issues that now confront us as we move to consolidate our actions to improve and flesh out the Human Rights Draft Declaration.

In relation to this, let me just interject these points that are certainly relevant to our tasks at hand. This is that as the national government pours more and more troops and resources in Mindanao, it is sucking half deeper and deeper into the quicksand of war. The pursuit of a military solution is incurring heavier casualties and greater costs all around, not to say the massive displacement of civilians and consequent human rights violations that can only breed increased resistance from the Moro people who feel brutalized by military might. For instance, barely two weeks ago, the president of the Mindanao State University reported that droves of students were abandoning their books to take up the gun in solidarity with the MILF cause.

What the national government must understand is that the political variable of **all-out war** is becoming the **critical factor** in the fast deterioration of the peso, in the panic flight of foreign portfolio funds and in the slowing down of economic growth for the entire country.



Our government should be reminded of a lesson from the Marcos dictatorship. Trying to defeat a rebellion primarily through military means is counter-productive and ultimately self-defeating. The strategy of total war did not only fail to stop the insurgency under Marcos but proved extremely wasteful of human and economic resources and morally unsustainable.

This is the same lesson the United States learned in Vietnam. Despite all the troops and military resources the U.S. deployed in the Vietnam War, the rising toll of casualties and expenditures ultimately drained public support for U.S. intervention in an increasingly unpopular war.

What this government needs to understand is that unrest and rebellion thrive on the institutionalized violence of poverty, neglect and human rights abuses. As I have stated in the first regional consultation of the human rights working group in Cordillera and in the second one in Quezon province, the spreading conflagration in Mindanao is a bleak reminder of how the old injuries of the past have returned to haunt the present because they were left to fester unresolved.

It underscores the fact that there has been no real progress either in the negotiations with the armed rebel groups or in the realization of fundamental social reforms. It highlights the imperative need to work out a basic settlement of the Moro problem as an act of justice to redress and compensate for the traffic experiences of the past.

In relation to this, my friends, let me reiterate this call. The government must immediately undertake a ***national peace policy*** that will shift the emphasis from a military solution to a negotiated-oriented resolution directed at the attainment of a just, principled, and enduring peace. Part and parcel of such a comprehensive peace strategy include—

One, the course of peace negotiations must be immediately resumed with the MILF and the NDF as well. These must seriously and resolutely address the root causes of war and impose ***no*** impossible preconditions like absolute surrender or unrealistic deadlines that will foreclose the chances of success of any peace talks.



Two, confidence-building measures must be initiated on the ground which include the immediate suspension of military offensives and a halt to the AFP's all-out war strategy, including the bombing of villages and the formation of paramilitary and vigilante groups which only complicate the climate of recurring violence. In line with this, and to prove its sincerity for serious peace negotiations, the government must recall arrest warrants against MILF leaders and members.

Three, while the burden of peace negotiations falls mainly on government, the other parties to the armed conflict must likewise start from a firm resolve to seek a negotiated political settlement, including but not limited to suspending military offensives and exhausting all non-violent modes of resolving the armed conflict.

My, friends, in this third regional consultation on the draft declaration, we are provided the opportunity of studying the aspects of government policy and military strategy that have helped perpetuate a climate of war and recurrent human rights violations. We are afforded a collective way of further improving, refining and validating our draft in the light of national realities and the regional situation existing here.

The draft declaration is a reflection of our life and struggles. It is in its capacity to address the challenge of peace and to serve as a yardstick of government compliance with its human rights obligations that its effectiveness shall be measured.

I wish this consultation every success in realizing its every objective. May we, in solidarity with each other, find the ways of peace together — a peace based on justice and freedom, a peace based on human dignity and equality, a peace founded on the affirmation of life and the fulfillment of human rights.

Maraming salamat, at magandang hapon sa inyong lahat.

