

Welcome Remarks to the Second Regional Consultation
on the Philippine Human Rights Draft Declaration
Nawawalang Paraiso Resort, Tayabas, Quezon
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On Metaphors and Peace

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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 and the organizers of this gathering, let me welcome you all to this little corner of lost paradise in my home province of Quezon. Isang magandang hapon sa inyo mula sa aming lahat!

The name of this resort is a fitting metaphor for a country of great beauty and unfulfilled promise but lost in the quagmire of war.

As we meet here today for the second regional consultation on the Working Draft of the Philippine Human rights Declaration, events continue to unfold from diverse fronts that can only make us wonder what really is happening to our country.

We are now more than a month into a war which, if we are to believe the military, should have petered out by now for lack of MILF ammunition but which is still going strong.

Many are now terrified to go shopping anywhere because of the bombings and bomb threats and thus we see security being stepped up everywhere but a hijacker makes off with a whole planeload of passengers and bails himself out with a homemade parachute that fails him fatally at the last minute.

We see more and more ranking envoys from Europe streaming into town to intercede for the safety of their hostaged nationals and even her Imeldific has likewise offered her services.

My friends, I don't know what it is about the Filipino character that there is always some touch of comedy to every tragedy, a joke somewhere in every crisis. Hindi mo pati alam kung dapat ka ba maiyak o tumawa na lang.

But that is the way of the Filipino. To laugh is to cry, especially when there is much to cry about. To make a joke is to make a point about things and people that need a crying change.

So please allow me now to make this point that needs to be urgently addressed. This is that as the national government pours more and more troops and resources and escalates the war in Mindanao – yes, it's a war, not a simple armed conflict as some government officials insist – it is sucking itself deeper and deeper into quicksand. 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.

What the national government doesn't seem to understand, as has been pointed out, 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 from the stock market and in the slowing down of economic growth rather than the purely economic variables.



The 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 our own national government needs to understand is that unrest and rebellion thrive on the institutionalized violence of poverty, neglect and human rights abuses. As I stated in the first regional consultation of the human rights working group in Cordillera which bears repeating, 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. The resurgence of the MILF should serve as a prod to government to work out a basic settlement of the Moro problem as an act of justice to redress and compensate for the tragic experiences of the past.

In relation to this, let me then forward the following points –

One, the national government must immediately undertake a national peace policy that will shift the emphasis from a military solution to a negotiated-oriented resolution towards the attainment of a just and lasting peace.

Two, part and parcel of such a policy is the immediate and unconditional resumption of peace negotiations with both the MILF and the NDF which will seriously and resolutely address the root causes of war.



Three, confidence-building measures must be initiated which include an immediate suspension of military offensives and a halt to the AFP's all-out war strategy, including the indiscriminate bombing of villages and formation of paramilitary and vigilante groups.

My friends, in this second regional consultation on the Working Draft of the Philippine Human Rights 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 the national realities and our own regional situation. In Southern Tagalog alone, cases of human rights abuses persist that demand immediate attention and just redress.

I wish this consultation every success in realizing its every objective, in the interest of our own region and our whole country. May we, in solidarity with each other, find the ways and 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. Only then can we regain the lost paradise that is rightfully ours – a Philippine at peace with itself.

Maraming salamat, at magandang hapon muli sa inyong lahat.

