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MEDIA REPORTING OF TERRORISM AND THE ABU SAYYAF THREAT: SCOPE AND SCOOP

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(Speech delivered during the Roundtable Discussion organized by PIPVTR on 29 July 2010 at the Aguinaldo Conference Room, Armed Forces of the Philippines Commissioned Officers' Club, Camp General Emilio Aguinaldo, Quezon City)

Good afternoon everyone.

I see familiar faces amongst you.

Now the question is: Is that something that brings me comfort or something that makes me nervous?

I say both. Seeing familiar faces in this gathering certainly bring me comfort for I consider these familiar faces my friends who practically saw my progress as a journalist. At the same time, your presence also brings butterflies to my stomach.

Oh yes I am a bit nervous but only because of the fact that this is the first time that I am speaking formally with you guys in the audience on a topic that you and I are familiar with, a topic we have had the opportunity of discussing and debating upon oh so passionately and intensely in the past in several occasions, informal and casual, over a cup of coffee most of the times.

Colleagues of mine are also present this afternoon. Thank you for finding the time to be here.

There are also faces that I am seeing for the very first time and I say this early that I am honored by your presence. The list of participants was actually provided to me by Prof. Rommel C. Banlaoi days before this activity and I must admit I got excited about the prospect of being given the opportunity to share my thoughts with key players in the efforts on counter-terrorism and partners in the long term goal and aspiration of **achieving a lasting and meaningful peace and stability in a region of the country that is very close to my heart: Southern Philippines, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or ARMM---my Muslim Mindanao.**

I did not come here to lecture or claim knowledge or expertise on something that you guys knew about. To lecture, I shall not even attempt especially before a group as esteemed as this one before me. **What is given to me is an opportunity to add my voice in putting perspective and insight as to the challenges and struggles of a working journalist entrusted unto the intricate, complex and very dangerous world of reporting on conflicts, violence, terrorism and peace related issues---a story, an assignment to most of us but a matter of national security and survival from the point of view of other sectors and groups.**

This opportunity I embrace and to the people behind the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research---my sincere thanks for the opportunity.

And so ladies and gentlemen, allow me **to speak from the heart---the only way I know how.**

When I heard about the series of round table discussions conducted by the PIPVTR, on hindsight, I wondered why I don't get invited to attend one?

That certainly sounds too presumptuous on my part to even think or entertain the idea that I would one day be considered worthy enough to be part of this round table discussion. Many questions may arise and I would be the first to point them out: Why do I think that I have something to say that would be of interest in the participants of this round table discussion? Or maybe, let's cut the bull---**the real question here is who do I think I am anyway?**

Now let me tell you who I think I am vis-à-vis the scope and the scoop on terrorism related issues.

If there's a model, a template or even a mascot for a journalist on **how to do it and how not to do it**---I am most probably that journalist.

I pulled out the greatest and most difficult scoops and exclusives in the field, leaving the competition miles and miles behind not once, not twice, not thrice but many times, several times, even I lost count, a feat and a record in the industry that is remembered and acknowledged for **how extraordinarily daring and brave** those scoops and exclusives were pulled but at the same time also talked about in another light for **how unabashedly reckless and insensitive** those scoops and exclusives were pulled and carried off.

Needless to say, this journalist before you, in a career spanning two decades earned both **supporters and detractors, admirers and critics** for everything that I stood for especially at the height of my days in the field chasing one scoop after another as if it was the only thing that I do and as if it was the only thing that matters: that I get it **first and exclusive**.

The Morning Show of CBS aired in the United States of America had this for a lead in to a report: **A journalist was able to do what the Philippine Military failed to do in the last seven months: locate the hostages, American couple Martin and Gracia Burnham.**

With a very powerful lead-in like that not written by this journalist but the producer of that morning show to the exclusive report I did in November of 2001, who would not get the ire of people especially those alluded to: the Philippine Armed Forces or at least some officers who saw or have heard of that report specifically those assigned in the intelligence community?

The truth is, (just my luck or even my curse)-no other journalist can lay claim of seeing the problem from a very vantage point of view, up close and personal and from all angles and perspectives. Say that what I just said isn't so and I have no business standing here before you to talk about scope and scoop of media's coverage of terrorism and the Abu Sayyaf Threat.

Having seen what I have seen...

Having gone where no one else dared venture...

---the first camp of the al Qaeda linked terror group that was silently established and organized in the Philippines in the early '90s-the Al-Harakatul al Islamiya widely known and referred to in media and various reports as the Abu Sayyaf Group or the ASG;

---the first face to face and interview with the founding leader of the ASG, Ustadz Abdurajack Abubakar Janjalani who was introduced to me then as Mufti—or someone who is scholarly educated to interpret the laws of the Koran (Quoran);

---the faces of the first kidnap victims of the ASG: Spanish priest Father Bernardo Blanco, then 4-year old Anthony "TonTon" Biel;

---the first recorded act of abuse and disrespect to a kidnap victim while in captivity;

---the first meeting with a controversial personality in the ASG who later turned out to be a deep penetration agent of the Philippine National Police Intelligence Group;

---the first discovery on the links and supporters of the ASG-local and international:

(I almost had the opportunity of getting what probably would have been the first and only interview of Ramsey Ahmed Yousef in 1993 if only I did not panic and chickened out when I was just steps away from where he was along with other Arabs and Filipino

Muslims, men and women, in one private function room at the EDSA Shangrila Hotel--- one of the other Arabs in that room, Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, the patron and benefactor of the ASG through the Al Makdum University then in Zamboanga City and the legally acknowledged international aid organization, the Islamic International Relief Organization or IRRO;)

---the first wave of battle between the Philippine Marines and the ASG;

---the first casualty, a soldier, a corporal, Corporal Ladaran whom his direct officer in command then young Lt. Roberto Velasco calls Ladsky-- who was hit in the gun-battle but in my opinion--- could have survived had he been evacuated by the Huey chopper of the Philippine Air Force that was deployed and called upon to evacuate him but failed to land because of the calibre .50 that the ASG fired at them; Corporal Ladsky literally died in my arms because of lose of blood at an advanced command post of the Marines in Kapatagan in Basilan, a task I was compelled to do as everyone else was busy firing their M-16, firing mortars, yelling, running---it was war and I was in the middle of all of it! That day, I became one with the Marines in life and in death I saw the gallantry and bravery of soldiers in the frontline but at the same time, an early realization as to how lives are wasted, dreams taken away just like that;

---the first successful rescue and retrieval of a hostage victim without any payment of ransom;

---the first victory, the take over of Al-Madinah, the first announcement of neutralization of the ASG only to resurrect with a bigger, daring and more menacing act of violence and hostility;

--the first beheading and mutilation act they committed—civilians, teachers, women—beheaded just because they were in the wrong route;

-the first act of aggression and intimidation against members of the media;

I could go on and on for the list is long and we are talking 20-years here of stories and events **covered** and **discovered**, **chased** and **pursued**.

And I do not even have to mention the irony of it all---the twist that I see as life changing and providential, that the journalist who made a name covering one hostage crisis after the other became a hostage herself for 98-days in 2002 by another armed group also in Southern Philippines.

To answer the question: Who do I think I am? –this is my answer: **A stakeholder**, a **potential player** in the pursuit of attaining a lasting peace and stability and even progress in the troubled region of Muslim Mindanao.

I have reached a point where I cannot just be a mere journalist anymore. Please do not misinterpret this as an application for any position in government----I am not going or leading into that direction.

When I was a hostage, Lakandula, Salif Abdullah in real life, one of the close-in aides of Professor and former Governor of the ARMM Nur Misuari asked me this question as he pointed to me the reality of the daily routine of one family passing by that nipa hut where they kept me in Barangay Anuling in Patikul Sulu, 2 hours of walk to the river to wash their clothes, get supply of drinking water, take a bath, stay there for like another 2-3 hours, and then walk again for another 2-hours back to where they live---practically a whole day wasted just to get access to a basic human need, water.

In Filipino Lakandula asked, *“Kailan ka matatapos mag-report at mang-iskup nang mag-iskup at tulungan ang mga taong nakita mo sa lahat ng liblib na lugar na napuntahan mo?”* (“**When are you going to go help the people that you saw in the remote areas that you’d been to instead of simply reporting and clinching a scoop?**”)

What I am trying to say is, beyond the reportage, the scoop and the professional, moral and even spiritual struggle attached to it, just like the soldier at war, the rebel in hiding, the civilians in between, the policy and decision makers---on my shoulder and even on my conscience lies this feeling of obligation and responsibility that somehow, somewhere, someday --- I can contribute and make a difference and influence the **realization of the aspiration and dreams of the people of Mindanao.**

The scope of media coverage is another matter.

For both the journalist pursuing a story on a terrorist group and the field operative engaged in counter-terrorism, full appreciation of the origins of terrorism in a specific area is very vital. In a way the journalist at work in pursuit of a delicate lead on a terror related story and an operative profiling a group linked to terrorism entails the same amount of **hard work and persistence, dedication and patience.**

It requires genuine and not a veiled intention of real understanding and of building human relationships in the process to fully understand and comprehend the story. For most journalists, it should be a case of just another story, all in day’s work---until the next big headline and big banner story. **But for some journalists, building trust and network is essential in their mission for to be a journalist is not just about being the channel of information but also and highly so---the catalyst for truth.**

In the lingo understood in the world of counter-intelligence, this is referred to as HUMIT or **Human Intelligence.**

Since the 9/11 attacks, much has been said, adjusted and fine-tuned in that front or area of counter-terrorism initiatives especially with the advent of new technology and sophisticated equipment in espionage and intelligence network. To go back to the basics of building intelligence has been the direction pursued with renewed dynamism with even the most powerful countries in the world like the United States of America.

It is my hope as a journalist that as institutions and individuals tasked in counter-terrorism work that alongside the **renewed appreciation of the basics of human**

intelligence build up and network is the parallel understanding and respect of how the journalist work to pursue the same story.

Like the operative involved in counter-terrorism, the journalist too needs to understand the origins of terrorism and the inter-relationships and connections of countries or states where cells of al-Qaeda rise.

The journalist, like the operative also needs **to know the fragile conditions that contribute to the vulnerability of regions, areas or communities under the influence of fundamentalist and radical Islamic beliefs and interpretations of religion.**

Like the operative with a mission, the journalist too is in constant analysis and appreciation of the evolving militancy and propaganda tools used by terrorist groups with the innate responsibility on hand that while the primary obligation is to report, there is also the moral responsibility that the media itself should **not be the tool to spread the very fear that the terrorist groups want to sow.**

The journalist, the media, the operatives must also understand, need to bring forward all issues about terrorism **to debate upon** and be the take off point of **political dialogue** for these moves are all part of the industry called the Fourth Estate.

I mentioned these points to call attention to the scope of reporting and hold on credible information that we both strive to achieve. Mutual respect is encouraged for if you go down to the bottom of it---we all face the same threat and danger from terrorist groups.

Winning the war versus terrorism entails the gathering of credible and accurate information and that includes us media.

To win the war, there should never be any employment, overt or covert, of strategies to control information.

The bigger mistake is to resort to the control of information that only lead to ignorance and promotion of unfounded fears.

We are partners in a complex way. Not on the same side of the equation for the natural **role of media will always be that of an adversary.** We will always probe, question, inquire and investigate until the truth is exposed, terrorism related issues or not.

It is not and I must stress NEVER in the oppression of media that propaganda of any kind is won.

Countries, governments, leaders—especially after the tragic experience of 9/11 and the super ferry bombing in the case of the Philippines, have been developing anti-terrorist strategies and plans of actions which include the drafting of new laws or Anti-Terrorism Act. We have our own version, the Anti-Terrorism Act.

At all times, even with the very real threat of terrorist groups globally, within the region and internally, **no law should be crafted with the intention of threatening personal freedom and press freedom.**

It sounds ideal but sometimes the reason why many fail to deliver the right solution is because we ceased believing in the things that are ideal, that are ought to be and should be.

Believe this: JOURNALISTS –especially the working journalists are deployed as agents and catalysts of truth and understanding. But apart from being journalists, these men and women are patriots too and they too have the national interest in their hearts.

When the time comes to make a life changing decision, in the face or a real threat, we know what to do.

It is true. Believe it.

It is in my heart. I am Arlyn dela Cruz and I am a journalist. #

Ms. Arlyn Dela Cruz is an award-winning Filipina journalist well-known for her rare and risky coverage of the Abu Sayyaf Group and terrorism events in the Philippines. Her new book, “A Lifetime of Freedom”, narrates her experiences in reporting terrorism including her harsh ordeal as a kidnap-for-ransom victim of Moro rebel group in the Southern Philippines. Her other book, “Witness to Terror” is forthcoming and among the topics she discussed in the book is about the making of a Filipino suicide bomber: Is there one out there? You may get in touch with Arlyn through her email address: arlyndelacruz@yahoo.com or arlyndelacruz@gmail.com.

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