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FILIPINO SOLDIERS AS CHAMPION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Remarks delivered on 12 August 2010 during the Launching of the AFP Soldiers' Manual for Human Rights and IHL at Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City

This is a proud day for the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The Filipino soldier's commitment to champion Human Rights and adhere to the Rules of Armed Conflict has led us to today's launching of the AFP Soldier's Manual for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. This day is a validation of our service to the Filipino people and encouragement for us to continue our quest to achieve peace and development. We in the AFP are intent on making our internal security approach Human Rights-based and bound within the purview of Philippine laws and International Humanitarian Law.

The publication of this Soldier's Manual will become the Filipino soldier's "bible" in our internal security campaign. It is one of the new thrusts set by the AFP leadership in reinforcing existing mechanisms to ensure military discipline and respect for Human Rights. The endeavor will involve the strengthening of our AFP Human Rights Office. Hence, there will be a Human Rights section down to the battalion level that will allow the monitoring and reporting of Human Rights violations (HRVs) on the ground. The AFP leadership needs this uninterrupted communication flow for us to be responsive to Human Rights complaints and be able to immediately put a stop to it if they do arise.

We also recognize that respect for Human Rights is at its core a question of values at the individual level. For this reason, we are going to invest extensively in Human Rights education and values formation for our personnel. Each soldier will emerge from this kind of training as an advocate of Human Rights and an adherent of command responsibility. Each will not only know the content of the Soldier's Manual but will develop the moral conviction to practice it. Each will understand that respect for human rights is not incidental or secondary to mission accomplishment it is a prerequisite to mission accomplishment.

The perceived poor Human Rights record ascribed to the AFP and the publicized military abuses has generated negative public perception. It has left seeds of doubt. And when doubt is present among people, our ability to move forward towards the same goal of national security and nation-building is impaired.

This is the first and most urgent war that the AFP must win. The victor is not the one with the largest body count against the enemy. It is the one who has the most number of people whose hearts and minds were won. It is the one who has earned, through their deeds, the trust and support of the people.

To win this war, we must get rid of doubt and work for public trust to grow in its place. The AFP will do this through our civil-military operations, engagement in dialogue and building alliances and partnerships with different actors in our society. And practicing transparency in our affairs when public interest necessitates will eliminate the cloud of doubts. I will echo what the Chiefs of Staff before me have said: **alleged abductions or killings were and will never be state-sanctioned and condoned.** This has always been our policy and it is high time that we build on and revitalize the existing mechanisms to reinforce this. We will recognize those who abide by the Rules of Engagement and enforce sanctions on those who neglect to conform with them. **Under my watch, respect for Human Rights and observance of Rule of Law will be on top of the AFP's list of priorities.**

These initiatives are aligned to that priority. I take pride in them, as all men and women of the Armed Forces do because it reflects our ability to respond and change according to what our clients – the Filipino people – need from us.

But we did not do all of this alone. The AFP will be honored to be working with the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and European Union-Philippines Justice Support Program (EP JUST). We are particularly grateful to the European Union, which has given the Philippines financial, technical, and educational support vital to strengthen the nation's criminal justice system. This signifies the trust you have given our government and by extension, the AFP. As you have pledged your support to us, the AFP pledges to do its part in safeguarding Human Rights. We also applaud and appreciate the role of ICRC as a promoter and guardian of International Humanitarian Law across the globe. Our Armed Forces and people are grateful for the admirable work you have been doing in the Philippines. Of course, we also acknowledge the contributions of our very own Commission on Human Rights that has been in the forefront of pushing for our national agenda on Human Rights. As in the words of our Commander-in-Chief, let us all walk the right path. *Sama-sama tayo sa pagtahak sa tuwid na daan.*

Admittedly, there is a lot of work to be done. Working towards reform always is. But nothing is impossible if everyone pitches in and does their part.

In closing, I want to greet everyone here a happy IHL day. I know all of us appreciate the landmark value of this day in making the world a more humane and safer place.

Thank you and good afternoon to us all.

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