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SEIZE THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT: WORK FOR PEACE NOW!

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OPENING ADDRESS

*at the Waging Peace in the Philippines Conference 2010: Seize the Opportune Moment:
Work for Peace Now!*

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Thank-you to the organizers of this conference for inviting me to help in opening this important conference. Thank-you, Karen; thank-you, Ed – and all the other convenor -- thank-you and congratulations for the heroic task that you have undertaken every year since 2002 of managing to hold this important reunion and gathering of peacemakers, peacekeepers, and peacebuilders from different nooks and coasts of our islands, joined by friends of the process from other parts of the world. I believe that the annual Waging Peace in the Philippines conference has drawn the broadest range of activists and students for peace in the country, with a faithful core that has been growing every year, to come together to assess the peace and conflict situation, mark the milestones, celebrate achievements, damn the acts of betrayal and cowardice, learn the lessons, draw comfort and inspiration from each other through both the good times and the worst times for waging peace along the different conflict lines which continue to disturb the lives of our people.

Thank-you for seeing that, within the current set-up, with all its constraints and vulnerabilities, there is an “opportune moment” to work for peace – today! Now na! I do hope – and it gives me hope - that you continue to see it that way, despite possible disappointments and confusion that some peace tracks have not moved as quickly as we had all hoped they would, in ways that you may have thought they should. I hope you

see the signposts of how, despite enormous challenges, many parties are moving, most definitely including government – in many fronts and tracks, both visible and below the radar screen – to ensure that the peace process moves from its lost momentum to a full throttle ahead. We all have seen how, in the latter years of the Arroyo administration, the building blocks to peace can suddenly collapse. Now we are given a second chance – in fact, our second chance for the nth time in history – and I do sense the collective feeling of eagerness to the point of impatience, of wanting to finish the work that we have started after having been disrupted again and again in the last three decades since the peace constituency first emerged in that precious democratic space after Edsa I. Indeed, the wording of the theme you have chosen to carry this year’s conference says it most pointedly: “SEIZE the opportune moment: work for peace NOW – and I dare say we should end that with an exclamation point! (Ok, it’s there. It wasn’t stated in the invitation).

I understand from your stated objective of “consolidating civil society voices and representatives of peoples’ organizations as well as champions in government” that this conference is also issuing an urgent call for collective action. Indeed, this has been a mantra of civil society peace advocates since they came into the national scene: *Ang kapayapaang makakamit natin ay kapayapaan gpinagtulungan at pinahirapan natin na sama-sama, na aangkinin natin namagkakasama.* We are crafting a peace shared by all and, in the process, our appreciation of the distinct but complementary roles of the different stakeholders has become deeper and more palpable. *Lalo na s apanahon n gpagsubok, tumitingkad ang kahalagahan ng iba’t ibang papel ng mga sector na nagtataya para sa kapayapaan.*

I have gone back and forth from civil society to government twice over, and I would like to say that what I found true since my coming full circle about the role of civil society in the peace process has remained the same: civil society has a unique and indispensable role to play in the protection and promotion of peace. NGOs, churches and faith groups, the private sectors, grassroots civil society actors have creatively and continually found ways to use whatever available political space to improve security, stability, and development for conflict-affected communities. With mandates that are independent from negotiating parties, civil society has a broad scope of support and more purposively depend on conflict-affected communities for guidance and direction.

When mechanisms of the peace process collapse, civil society groups provide the alternative to sustain the process, especially in holding negotiating parties accountable for their actions. *Isang malakas na pananaw ng civil society ang paglampas sa pananaw na ang mga pamayanan ay biktima na walang kakayanang makialam sa mga bagay na magbabago sa buhay nila.* Civil society groups have actively brought all stakeholders to a firm view of the impact of actions on the lives of people on the ground, who bear the brunt of violence and have the most stake in preserving the peace. *Sa karanasan, ang karamihan sa peace monitors ng civil society ay nanggagaling mismo sa mga pamayanang naapektuhan ng putukan.* *Dahil dito, silay ay epektibo at maasahan.* Aside from being acknowledged by both the government and MILF as credible, independent, third-party monitors, they have also been effective in tracking early warning signs of conflict to help prevent further escalation.

Having said this, please allow me to further discuss what I think are opportune spaces for collective action between civil society and government, as far as the peace process is concerned. Broadly, I see three: one in terms of building the context and environment that allows peace to work and makes it sustainable; two, in terms of bringing and keeping all parties to stay committed to dialogue on the negotiating table; and, third, in terms of continuing to build peace on the ground.

In terms of building the context and environment that allows peace to work, leadership now for me is already an indicator that there is hope that we can move forward in this area. First is the fact that, finally and for the first time, a national peace policy has been defined. President Aquino defines the government's national security policy as "not only focusing on ensuring stability of the State and the security of our nation," certainly not at all focusing on the defense and the security of the president. Rather, "Our ultimate goal must be the safety and well-being of our people."

Accordingly, the P.Noy administration anchors its National Security Policy on four pillars: (1) Governance – *maayos na pamamahala*, consistent with the President's campaign slogan, "*Kung walang korap, walang mahirap*"; (2) Delivery of Basic Services – *mga batayang serbisyo, na ang nangunguna ay ang basic education and health services, kasama na rin ang kaagarang pangkabuhayan*; (3) Economic Reconstruction and Sustainable Development, with the main message being that conflict areas will not be left behind – *walang maiiwanan*; (4) Security Sector Reform. Please let me elaborate a little bit more about Security Sector Reform or SSR, as this one feature is new or recent in terms of inclusion and articulation in the peace agenda. According to Dr. Heiner Hanggi of the Geneva-based Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), the Philippines is among the first countries, if not the first, in the south to explicitly mention SSR as a pillar of national policy.

The President's SSR involves strengthening the capacity and enhancing discipline among security forces serving under firm democratic civilian control to attain peace and security. In the past, the links between SSR and the Philippine peace process have been minimal or perhaps the more accurate word is superficial. SSR and the peace process are both important. They are mutually reinforcing processes: SSR should make the peace process more achievable and vice-versa. I am hopeful that under the current administration, SSR and the peace process will have a stronger and more effective interface. For one, there is new leadership in the military and the police among whom earnest discourse on human rights and the primacy of the peace process is evident, albeit nascent. The current Cabinet Security Cluster is chaired by the Secretary of the Interior and Local Government, which position is currently held by a civilian and a leading, practicing champion of democratic governance. In the current Security Cluster, furthermore, women's voices are known and heard – no tokenism in this regard.

Through Memorandum Order No. 6 signed on October 21, 2010, the President has directed the National Security Adviser to spearhead the effort of formulating the National Security Policy and the National Security Strategy for 2010-2016, to be completed on or before April 30, 2011. The Memorandum Order stipulates that "All sectors of society, both government and non-government, are enjoined to participate in this national endeavour in order to arrive at a national consensus on our development objectives and national security policies." In accordance with this directive, last

November 2, 2010, even before the draft work plan has been presented to the full Cabinet, key officials of the Office of the National Security Adviser presented and discussed the plan in a forum convened by INCITEGov. I know for a fact that, because of the comments received at the forum, the definition of “national security” has been revised to place the safety and well-being of our people before the imperatives of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The second arena for collective action between civil society and government lies in bringing and making all parties to stay committed to dialogue on the negotiating table.

In informal chair-to-chair meeting which surprised the public last week, the Government and the CPP/NPA/NDF have agreed to resume formal talks in February and to mutually observe the suspension of military offensives during the Christmas season. This will be the first of such talks after negotiations were suspended in August, 2005. Furthermore, the “Christmas ceasefire” to be observed from December 16, traditionally the beginning of the *Simbang Gabi* among Catholic Filipinos, up to the end of January 3, 2011 – a total of 19 full days – is the longest ceasefire period agreed upon by the two parties in the last ten years.

With regard to the peace talks between Government and the MILF, we are grateful that, through unilateral actions taken by both parties, the concerned countries have agreed to extend the tours of duty of their respective contingents in the International Monitoring Team for another three months until late February or early March next year. Let me furthermore quote from Prof. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer – Iye, a veteran of Waging Peace – who spoke on behalf of the government Panel during the 6th Peace Media Summit in Davao last November 5, 2010. She put forward the fact that the government Panel is ready and “anxious to see the talks resume; to have the elements of a resolution sorted out at the soonest possible time, and have the bigger portion of P.Noy’s term devoted to implementation.” It is important, however, for government, as with any party that engages in negotiations, to have a table that it can trust. Again, let me quote from Iye, “In any negotiation, there should be a level of comfort with regard the infrastructure for the talks that will carry us through for the long haul. This is a matter we would like to believe the other party deems essential to address.” In this regard, we have directed all our concerns to Malaysia, as is only proper. We remain hopeful that these issues will be resolved soon to allow the talks to immediately resume – and, while I cannot go into details, I can confirm that the basis for my optimism gained ground over the last couple of days.

In her speech at the Mindanao Media Summit last month, Iye also put forward the government Panel’s position that negotiations are basically a “problem-solving” exercise. “It is not a contest between one party’s draft and the other’s, with each one trying to dominate the outcome. The negotiation, to succeed, has to be a collaborative process with both parties acutely aware that they are trying to address issues that involve multiple stakeholders, separate branches and agencies of government, and deep, interrelated root causes, while earnestly bridging the gaps in history, current realities, and the desired future.” In this spirit, and with the Panel’s “commitment to resolve differences in good faith,” (in the words of Dean Leonen, GRP chief negotiator,) I choose

to nurture hope and confidence that decisive steps from all sides will move the process forward to arrive at mutually agreed upon modalities and agreements.

Finally, we are pursuing the closure of peace tracks with the Moro National Liberation Front, the Cordillera People's Liberation Army, and the RPM-P/RPA/ABB, with all of whom the government has already signed peace agreements – that is, ten years ago for the RPM-P/RPA/ABB, 14 years ago for the MNLF, and 24 years past for the CPLA. We are determined to find an honourable, bilateral process that will bring to a positive conclusion all signed peace agreements within the term of the P.Noy administration, navigating paths rendered difficult because of the long gap between the signing and the implementation of agreements, made even more difficult because of the seemingly irreconcilable splits among the concerned groups. I have said before that I did not return to government service in my senior years to play with or manipulate the process. I am here to push straightforward processes and results-oriented closure on all peace tracks.

Last August 4, just completing our first month back on the job, OPAPP convened an assembly of established civil society partners, which was noted to have drawn in the broadest range of peace networks nationwide as the first step in determining the structures and mechanisms by which we can ensure sustained consultation and engagement in the peace process, involving as much as possible the full range of concerned sectors, communities, and constituencies. To ensure that these consultations are meaningful and sustained, we asked our civil society peace partners to let us know how and on what levels they wish to engage the process, what structures and mechanisms they wish to put in place, and what support, if any, they wish to receive from government. We continue to await more concrete signals as to the answer to our questions. Please help us to cast the widest net in what should be a two-way communication stream.

On the third point, in terms of continuing to build peace on the ground, we have asserted time and again that peace is not made just on the negotiating table but must be waged as vigorously on the ground. Let us work together to close the gap between what happens at the negotiating table and what happens in the communities affected by armed conflict. We urgently need to address the wide-spread, complex, and inter-generational impact of violent conflict in affected communities. We believe that these efforts will help to provide an environment conducive for the talks and help gain support and trust of all the stakeholders in the peace process. We hope that our dialogue partners on the other side of the negotiating table will agree to work with government and other stakeholders to bring governance and development to conflict-affected areas while looking for and building common ground to find permanent solutions to age-old issues of grievance and contestation.

Under this track, the pursuit of a just and lasting peace shall be pursued at the community level, particularly in conflict-affected and vulnerable communities. Appropriately designed community-based or community-driven projects shall be the anchor of this track. The approach will support the rebuilding of communities and activities for peace and reconciliation initiated by communities. It will also focus on vulnerable households, especially IDP families, indigenous peoples, and former rebels, and adopt an integrated approach to understanding and addressing the issues at the

household, community, and sub-regional levels. It will have a strong social preparation component, including community organizing, orientation, and trainings for capacity-development. It will pursue the convergence of efforts of national agencies but will also draw heavily from the support of local governments, local CSOs, and international development partners, to help ensure sustainability. It will do an environmental scan to make sure that, at the end of the road, these communities have the means for continued progress and growth and that further sources of conflict, including contestation over land and natural resources, are addressed.

The national program for peace-building, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development in conflict-affected and vulnerable areas is named PAMANA, for *Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan*. PAMANA will aim to reduce poverty and vulnerability in conflict-affected barangays, improve governance, and strengthen people's capacity to engage local and national government in development.

Even as I speak about my own hopes for the peace process and put forward government's plans to bring these hopes into reality, I am only too aware of the high level of scepticism, cynicism, even despair that surrounds my words in some circles. I was just in Zamboanga where a private sector representative told the assembly his colleagues in business could no longer be goaded to attend peace fora because they've already heard it all before – *paulit-ulit langyan*. In every forum, I am asked to provide evidence that it will be different this time. They ask me what is new in our approach – questions that cannot be satisfied because they are based on mistrust or are desperate for magic. While the government Chairs and Panels as well as myself have certainly hit the media and forum circuit more proactively and at a far earlier stage than our predecessors have done, including myself during my first tour of duty, we are constantly lectured for our lack of communications plan, even while we are criticized by others for divulging too much to the public, charged of being amateurs in the field of diplomacy and negotiations.

I understand where the cynicism is coming from. It is part of the legacy of circuitous, manipulated, and stalled negotiations in the past; the harvest of unkept promises, of short cuts to gain agreements which neither side truly prepared to implement. It is born of bitterness and impatience over too many lives lost, of cycles of displacement, of peace processes overcome by politics. It is easier to believe in hidden hands at play, of doves outmaneuvered by hawks, of a President that lies or doesn't care because that is what we have grown used to. It is a heavy burden that weighs down on the peace process, reminding us everyday of how much harder we will need to work to bring about actions and results that will make our words believable, the peace process to be deemed worthy of trust.

What is true is that these "opportune times" constitute days of enormous – sometimes seemingly overwhelming – challenge. The burden of distrust rests firmly on a legacy of failed governance and dysfunctional politics, neither of which can be overcome and transformed in the five months that this administration has been in office – even if this were the best prepared and most competent administration to take over Malacanang, which it, admittedly, is not. Oh, yes, we have still to sanction LGUs so that they stay where the voters who elected them live and not in the nearest urban center if not in Manila. We still need to dismantle private armies and disentangle lawless

elements from the rebels. We all need to solve the problem that is rido. We need to free the innocent, prosecute the guilty whether in hiding or in the House of Representatives. We need to install the rule of law so that democracy may reign.

I guess endless meetings and sleepless nights make these opportune times very difficult indeed. Sometimes one wonders if taking the chance to try to make a difference, to try to not just wage peace but to win the peace, wasn't naïve, foolhardy, even crazy. And then, I remember – I remember that amazing things have already happened during these opportune times. In the midst of cynicism, bitterness, and sometimes near-despair, are wonderful images:

I see my boss, P-Noy, whose boss you are, signing letters, making phone calls, making time for meetings on very short notice because they are called for to make the peace. I remember his words yesterday to foreign guests, to foreign observers helping with the peace process, where he said, – “My mother started, my mother tried; I want to finish.”

I see the image of the Secretary of Justice, who says, the litmus test of the justice system is the resolution of the Maguindanao massacre. In fact, she says – “It is my own litmus test.”

I see the legislators leading the committee on peace and reconciliation in both Houses, truly trying to accompany the process, reaching out to accompany the process, both for talks and on the ground..

I see soldiers. I see them -- who care as much as I do, when hostilities break out; who ask for copies of speeches that I make because they will serve as their guideline.

I see, I remember, the first all-women contingent launched in Aleosan, in that wonderful celebration of women from different tribes, different ages, speaking together, dancing together, inaugurating their two-room office, that was given by the mayor of Aleosan who previously was known as an Ilaga who armed his people to go against the MILF. Aleosan today is no longer the battleground but where economic activities are taking place and where conflict is being transformed into peace.

I remember being in Bunuan two weeks ago for the provincial day of Maguindanao where they held a dialogue of elders and where they had the most wonderful cultural programs that I have seen, where Fidura is 7 years old to 70 playing and dancing and playing the gong. And that 11 o'clock I was leaving because I was supposed to be off very early the next morning. The people were still in the streets, heavy in the streets. And I was saying did this ever happen before, in the past administration. And of course, it did not. That night we spoke of a transformed Maguindanao, pushing to become the new face of Mindanao.

I was in Zamboanga last week and among the things that they did was to launch a peace monument done by a Muslim artist with a dove that is a hand reaching out for peace, based on a three-sided pillar. One side with a Christian symbol, one side with a Muslim symbol, one side with a lumad symbol. It is in Sta. Maria. The ground there was volunteered by the barangay captain of Sta. Maria. Please go when you go to

Zamboanga. There's just not a port anymore in Zamboanga, there's also a peace monument.

And then there is the image of Bridget Pawid, long time partner, taking her oath of office, crossing over for the first time, in her senior year, brave woman to become a key person in the agency that will determine policy and programs for indigenous peoples.

I remember the images, and I take out the pictures and remember where we came from, how we started, those who waged peace who have gone before –

And I remember how young we were, I remember how we thought we can wage peace in so short a time. But we have taken many steps, we have broken much ground, and many of us hstill stand where we stood before.

For those who don't believe that I was young once.

Waging peace has never been easy, and there certainly were times when it would have been easier to turn our backs, and magkanya-kanya na lang uli. But you continued to stand up and insisted on staying the course, persisted in drawing lessons, in affirming capacities and hopes, in celebrating faith and fortitude. In our hearts, peace has won. *Sapat na itong simula para tahakin ang marami pang malulubak at makikitid na mga daan.* Despite having walked through often fractured and fragile paths to peace, we persevered with a firmer resolve to engage for the long haul, knowing that short cuts and quick fixes may work for the moment but will usually not hold.

In our hearts, peace has already been won.

Indeed, the peaceful path to a just and sustainable peace for our people will be difficult to traverse; the way ahead may be littered by landmines. NO – I know it is littered with landmines. But we have no choice: *ang prosesong pang kapayapaan ay paret ng daang matuwid na dapat nating labayin para makamit ang maayos at progresibong lipunang nararapat para sa mga nagkakaibang mga Pilipino.*

With the synergistic efforts of stakeholders from broad sectors of society, we can achieve the lasting peace that we aspire for. Let us take hope in the closing words of President Aquino in the speech he made last April 22 before he became president, when he announced his national peace policy, where he said, “With this approach and with the consent of our people, I am confident that the next six years will be a watershed period in the history of our young nation that is at peace with itself and proudly marching towards an even brighter future.”

Thank you and may you have a fruitful discussion for the rest of the afternoon.