

**KAPIHAN ON HUMAN RIGHTS**  
**Towards a Meaningful Human Rights Agenda**  
**Welcome Remarks by Wigberto Tanada**  
**10 July 2009**

Excellencies -

Ladies and Gentlemen -

Good morning.

In behalf of the Philippine Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, and its member organizations, I would like to welcome all of you to today's forum. I would like to take this early opportunity to express the Philippine Working Group's gratitude to the indomitable leader of the Commission on Human Rights - Chairperson Leila de Lima - for graciously accepting our invitation to speak this morning. I would also like to quickly thank the Working Group Secretariat, the interns of the Ateneo Human Rights Center, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, for providing administrative, logistic and financial resources for our Kapihan. The synergy of these longtime partners is such that I, as Chair, can well afford to relax and leave the groundwork for such an important undertaking to them.

Today's Kapihan - while affording representatives from the basic and/or marginalized sectors the opportunity to discuss what should ideally be included in the next administration's human rights agenda - also allows the Philippine Working Group to feel the pulse of the people, especially as it relates to the issues which ought to be prioritized.

As those of you who may be familiar with our advocacy would know, the Philippine Working Group is part of a larger whole. That is, we form part of the Regional Working Group which has, for the last 15 years or so, advocated for the establishment

of a human rights mechanism in the ASEAN region through a constructive, consultative and step-by-step process involving governments and civil society groups.

While the Philippine Working Group has been a devoted supporter of all activities undertaken at regional level, it has also always tried to bring down the primary regional objective into the national sphere and has always sought to contextualize the advocacy in Philippine terms.

In December of 2002, we initiated the annual *Kapihan* on the prevailing human rights situation. While traditionally the *Kapihan* is a venue where the different branches of government are given an opportunity to elaborate on their plans, and where government and civil society present their assessments on the prevailing human rights situation as well as dialogue with each other, the Philippine Working Group has determined that the reformatting of this particular *Kapihan* is critical in light of the 2010 elections and the significance of getting the presidential candidates to present and commit to a concrete human rights action plan.

With the elections in May fast approaching, even with all the early salvos of mud slinging and negativity which herald every Philippine election, there is still an unmistakable feeling of hope, that after 10 years of the current administration, there can be change.

Not that there *will* be change, but that there *can* be change. And it is our responsibility to seize these windows of opportunity and widen them as far as they can go for the benefit of our people and our homeland.

Therefore, while our "presidentiables" scramble to raise their survey rankings and put together a semblance of a workable

platform, we have to impress upon them, each and everyone of them, that committing to a human rights agenda is not only desirable but vital to their bids for the highest office of the land. We have to impress upon them that having a meaningful human rights agenda is an important consideration for us the electorate to gauge their commitment to real and positive change; we have to impress upon them that fidelity to this agenda will be an important standard by which we, and history, will be assessing the success of the next administration.

Too long have we seen human rights issues ignored or paid only the most token of lip service in the policies and action plans of our government. While the politicians are still candidates and, arguably still inclined to listen and learn, let us contrive to elicit from them a commitment to a plan - and then let us hold them accountable to that plan.

The exigencies of the times - which see impunity at its insidious worst and corruption as a sinister constant in public life - require that we step up our efforts to do what we can for our people, to assert our rights and theirs, and to demand from our leaders the accountability which should be a byword for public service. Speaking out is a shared responsibility.

For us who have followed the developments in ASEAN, it has been gratifying to see the beginnings of a strengthened regional association. ASEAN has a long way to go but it has started to acknowledge the centrality of the people, and the vital importance of human rights as a fundamental principle of a new ASEAN Community. It has taken on a Charter and has started to transform itself into a rules-based organization which is committed to "strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and to promote and protect

human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of the Member States of ASEAN". It has also recently launched the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights which is committed to, among other things, "promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of the peoples of ASEAN", and to "uphold the right of the peoples of ASEAN to live in peace, dignity and prosperity".

This is also what we want for our people. However, while a very important step, the AICHR's establishment will not cure all ills in the region. I dare say that even if the terms of reference contained the full complement of protection and promotion functions possible in a regional system, it would still not have been enough. For the fact remains that any regional mechanism, even the most empowered one which the Working Group can conceive and dream of, is but complementary to effective domestic systems in place. It can serve to catalyze change but the regional cannot and should not substitute the national. Such is not its purpose and is beyond its competence. Those of us who advocate change and reform must therefore also continue to do so on this level. I therefore cannot emphasize enough the value of what we do today, of dialogue on matters such as these, and the importance of working hard within our countries to eradicate destructive and sinister practices which violate fundamental human rights.

So the Philippine Working Group will continue to be a devoted supporter of all activities regional, but it will also carry on at the national level, supporting human rights work within the Philippines, to contextualize the advocacy in Philippine terms. Hopefully, a meaningful human rights agenda which the presidentiables and, more importantly, the next

administration, can commit to, will provide all of us the means for constructive engagement and allow us an effective tool to continue human rights advocacy.

Again, thank you all for coming and I hope this *Kapihan* will be a productive dialogue and of value to the ultimate goal we all share - the protection and promotion of our people's human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Thank you.