

STATEMENT OF ACCEPTANCE AS APPOINTED CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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Good morning, Honorable Commissioners, Directors, and Regional Heads of the Commission on Human Rights:

It was hardly two months ago when I was watching television and I saw you and your beloved Chair, Leila de Lima, all teary-eyed, bidding each other goodbye. You did not want to let her go; she was after all only two years your Chair. Yet she made such an impact on the public as she led the Commission in projecting to us all the importance of the Commission's integrity, independence, and courage in asserting the protection of human rights against all odds: police brutality, summary killings of suspected petty thieves, drug addicts, many of which were tolerated by local government officials; political killings, enforced disappearances, and torture of perceived enemies of the state by soldiers.

These are shoes of the former Chair that are difficult to fill, no doubt. But we all know that the Chair could not have functioned as efficiently and effectively without you all-out support.

It is in this light that I accept the challenge of chairing the Commission under the mandate of the law. May I now define the immediate and intermediate thrusts we must unite on under the Fourth Commission?

In the immediate, we must unite with a sense of history of who we are and what faces us now. We are a product of a long political struggle by the Filipino people against dictatorship. The first post-dictatorship president, Corazon Aquino, set up the Commission to protect us against the gross human rights violations suffered by our people through 14 years of one-man rule.

Our former Chair, Leila de Lima, reminded us of that period of courage and commitment and service to the people when she led the Commission against hostile elements, both inside and outside government. *We must continue this mandate she left us. We must continue to prioritize the protection of human rights against police brutality and summary killings by agents of the state.* This is in the immediate.

But we must likewise understand that police brutality is a reflection of a grossly flawed criminal justice system and that military atrocities are the unresolved practices of a militarist mindset reminiscent of dictatorial rule.

Police and military atrocities are committed against popular dissent, both armed and unarmed, because of government's failure to enforce social justice policies mandated by law. *It is therefore in the interest of the Commission to intervene and remind government to*

respect and protect the social, economic, and cultural rights of the people, with special focus on the marginalized and deprived sectors of the population: the indigenous peoples, the rural and urban poor, and the people with disabilities. A human rights perspective in governance is imperative and it is in enforcing this mandate that the Commission must strengthen its relations with the various branches of government.

Outside state violence, we ourselves have tolerated violence in our own lives: bloody initiations among fraternities, a number resulting in death; cruel and exploitative labor practices of employers against workers; domestic violence against battered wives and children; and, among armed resistance groups, violations of international humanitarian law in the guise of revolutionary goals.

Our task as a human rights institution is to address this predominance of violence and impunity by taking the lead role but without illusions of being able to solve this sorry state of violence by ourselves.

In the long stretch, we must inspire the humanity in each of us and together nurture a culture of human rights in every nook and corner, at home, in the school and barangay communities, in diverse church institutions and in every level of governance and law enforcement. The AFP under General Ricardo David promises a human rights center in every battalion. That's a promising start. It means internalizing the human rights provisions of the Anti-Torture Law in banning secret detention centers and putting a stop to enforced disappearances.

It has launched the publication of an AFP Manual on IHL. That's an encouraging initiative. Let us challenge the non-state armed groups to publish their own manuals on IHL. This can pave the way for more substantial dialogues on building bridges for peace among the armed forces both within and outside government. CHR can play its intervening role in this challenging endeavor.

Our tasks for the day:

1. Work hard for the passage of our amended Charter to strengthen our mandate on human rights promotion and protection.
2. Instill institutional reform within the Commission in compliance with the Charter and our legal mandate.
3. Oversee the enforcement of existing and newly passed human rights legislation, including the Anti-Torture Act and the IHL. Call for the passage of IHR such as the Rome Statute and the Covenant on Enforced Disappearance.
4. Strengthen relations with partners both government and non-government in building a culture of human rights within ourselves and our society.