

# **“EXTENDING THE HORIZONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS”**

## **Celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

**Keynote Address of Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo**

**“The Philippine Human Rights Tradition: Past, Present and Future”**

UP Theater, Diliman, Quezon City  
12 December 2023

Hon. UP President Angelo Jimenez,

Excellencies,

Ambassador Rosario G. Manalo,

Members of the diplomatic corps,

Professor Bertrand Ramcharan, former UN Acting High Commissioner for Human Rights,

Professor Elizabeth Aguilung-Pangalangan,

Mr. Orest Nowosad,

Esteemed partners from government, civil society and the academe,

Dear Students,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to join you this morning, here in the heart of one of our country's foremost institutions of higher learning, my alma mater, the University of the Philippines, to celebrate Human Rights Day.

This year is particularly special because it is the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a seminal document that shaped the international human rights framework which binds all states in solemn commitment as duty-bearers to promote and protect human rights of all individuals and communities, everywhere, at all times.

As a founding member of the United Nations, the Philippines played an active role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration through former Foreign Affairs Secretary, the late General Carlos P. Romulo, who was a member of the first United Nations Commission on Human Rights that prepared the first draft of the UDHR.

The first article of the UDHR: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” bears the stamp of General Romulo. He championed the principles of unity of the human race and argued passionately in support of equality of all human beings and races and the right to self-determination of all peoples.

Indeed, the legacy of our nation is steeped in human rights. In the early days of the UN, the Philippines was a champion for the independence of nations still under the yoke of colonialism. Based on our own struggles, we knew that there could be no true justice or equity in a world ruled by the powerful few, while the vast millions suffered and could not experience the freedom of charting their own destinies in accordance with their national realities and conditions.

We were and remain a firm believer that while human rights are universal, they also need to be home grown and fostered by our peoples to take strong root and bear lasting fruit.

Hence, we staunchly opposed apartheid and took a leading role against any acts that could threaten humanity on such a scale as the wars of the 20th century which gave rise to the current multilateral system with the UN at its center. We worked tirelessly to help codify human rights into binding international treaties, such as the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Civil and Political Rights.

This deep and resolute commitment to human rights has been steadfast, and a big part of the Philippine diplomatic tradition. Our advocacies for the human rights of women, indigenous peoples, children, migrants, persons with disabilities, and older persons are embedded in our foreign policy. And significantly contributed to the establishment of the array of international human rights instruments and mechanisms which enhance the enjoyment of human rights worldwide.

It is important, through events and symposia such as today's, that we celebrate and continue the Philippines' robust human rights tradition. For as much as we address our challenges, which all countries grapple with, we must also take pride in how much we have accomplished and how we as a people and government have indeed "extended the horizons of human rights."

It was the Philippines, through the late Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani and Ambassador Rosario Manalo, which was the driving force in the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women or CEDAW. Ambassador Manalo has served as a member of CEDAW with distinction for many years.

It was the Philippines which pushed for the Convention on the Protection of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, that seeks to enhance the welfare and rights of all migrants, regardless of their status. Philippine Ambassador Jose Brillantes is regarded as one of the best Chairs of the Migrant Workers' Committee.

Our Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act served as the model of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and a Filipina indigenous advocate, Vicki-Tawili Corpuz served as UN Special Rapporteur on indigenous peoples' rights.

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines was instrumental in the creation of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and developing the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. Again, Ambassador Manalo was key to the enactment of these crucial regional human rights mechanisms.

Our human rights legacy is embodied in our national human rights institution, founded under our Constitution, the Commission on Human Rights is regarded as an international gold standard by being an accessible and credible human rights monitor.

National government agencies, such as the Presidential Human Rights Committee, have worked tirelessly to ensure the Philippines' compliance with its national and international human rights obligations. The innovative 75-to-75 whole-of-government and whole-of-society program to commemorate the anniversary of the UDHR, is yet another example of how seriously we take on our responsibilities.

Most of all, we see human rights alive and well in our people, our vibrant civil society and media, who consistently advocate for human rights, raising their voices for the vulnerable here and in the wider world.

And yet as we celebrate our achievements of the past and present, let us always keep an eye on the future.

The Philippines' open engagement with the international community, who are represented here through the UN and the diplomatic corps, represents the policy of the Administration of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. that emphasizes equal and mutually beneficial partnerships, open and frank dialogue, and constructive engagement on human rights.

The President stressed at the UN General Assembly last year that the discourse on human rights should be genuine, peaceful, evidence-based and depoliticized.

In this spirit, the Government openly discusses challenges and forges means to enhance respect and protection of human rights through active

and meaningful cooperation, such as through the UN Joint Program, an innovative and comprehensive technical cooperation program hailed as the first of its kind, which supports the Government efforts to enhance justice reforms, inclusivity, accountability and the rule of law. In its last year, we seek to build on its work by ensuring national ownership of projects for lasting impact and relevance.

We also cooperate with UN Special Rapporteurs on country visits, submit periodic reports on the implementation of the eight core international human rights treaties we are a Party to, and we accepted a record 215 recommendations we received during our last Universal Periodic Review.

The Philippines leads the way on emerging human rights issues, such as the impact of climate change on human rights. We were among the first countries to raise this issue at the Human Rights Council. Due to our determination, language on human rights and climate change from our resolution is found in the Paris Agreement, and the world community now clearly acknowledges that climate change is also a human rights issue.

The Philippines is a strong supporter of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda as established by UN Security Council Resolution 1325. It is the first country in Asia to formulate a National Action Plan- WPS to localize the provisions of UN SC Resolution 1325. As we continue our campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council for the term 2027-2028, promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda is one of our priorities. It will also figure prominently in our Chairmanship of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2024.

The Philippines likewise pays great attention to combating trafficking in women and girls, both at the national and international levels. The Philippines facilitates the biennial resolution “Trafficking in Women and Girls” at the General Assembly. The Philippines also co-facilitates the biennial resolution “Violence Against Women Migrant Workers.”

Recognizing we must also support human rights in other countries as a responsible member of the international community, the Philippines contributes to the OHCHR’s voluntary trusts funds for technical cooperation, implementation of the Universal Periodic Review, and participation of indigenous peoples in UN meetings.

At the high-level event being held in Geneva on the UDHR yesterday and today, the Philippines has recommitted itself to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Executive Secretary Lucas P. Bersamin announced the Philippine pledge to:

1. Establish a training institute for forensic science and investigation;
2. Create a National Human Rights Coordinating Council to advance UNJP initiatives post 2024; and
3. Adopt a Human Rights Action Plan, embracing emerging values such as climate justice and the rights of older persons.

I believe that through your discussions today with the student body, the youth that represent our collective future, you will further gain insights and generate new ideas and initiatives that will fill the successive chapters of the Philippine human rights story.

In closing, on this special occasion, in accordance with our long-standing and rich human rights tradition, let me reaffirm the Philippines' full support and unwavering commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

True to the achievements of our past, clear-eyed about the challenges and opportunities of the present, and filled with hope and aspiration for a better tomorrow, the Philippine Government will continue to remain actively engaged with the international community, human rights mechanisms, and stakeholders in ensuring that the fundamental freedoms and human rights of all Filipinos are always upheld and protected.

Thank you and *Mabuhay!*