Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Commission on Human Rights 4 May 2017

Dear Chairman Gascon and other members of the Commission on Human Rights,

Dear government officials,

Dear colleagues and members of the diplomatic corps,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here tonight to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Commission on human rights!

Since its creation, the CHR has an excellent track record of hard work to promote human rights and democracy in the Philippines.

Along with governmental institutions, the role of the CHR is essential, notably:

- to investigate all forms of human rights violations involving civil and political rights,
- to provide appropriate legal measures for the protection of human rights of all persons within the Philippines, as well as Filipinos residing abroad,
- to exercise visitorial powers over jails, prisons, or detention facilities,
- to recommend to Congress effective measures to promote human rights and to provide for compensation to victims of violations of human rights, or their families,
- to monitor the Philippine Government’s compliance with international treaty obligations on human rights.
The EU has been working with the CHR for many years through different cooperation programmes. We will continue to do so in the future in partnership with the Kingdom of Spain through the GOJUST Human Rights programme whose main objective is to strengthen the capacities of government institutions to combat impunity and strengthen the rule of law in the Philippines.

I seize this opportunity to underline the traditionally close bonds that have existed between the EU and the Philippines, based on shared values and interests, and express our wish for continued close cooperation. As illustrated by the abolition of the death penalty in 2006, the Philippines has been seen as the beacon of democracy and human rights in Asia for many years. The moral leadership taken by the Philippines has served the country well. The progress in many areas has been remarkable: on gender issues, on children's rights, on labour rights just to name a few areas, the Philippines is a model for many other countries.

In my view, it is important that this positive trend from the past is maintained. Stepping backwards on human rights is not the way forward.

Human rights is about securing that all citizens are respected and given opportunities to develop in harmony and with respect for each other. It is a way to secure that societies are not dominated by the privileged few and with disregard to others.

Human rights are about justice and fairness in societies.

These are issues that concern all; issues that should have no borders, but should be shared aspirations for all.

Yes, for the EU human rights are an integral part of all aspects of our policies. The European Union views all human rights as universal, indivisible and interdependent. It actively promotes and defends them both within its borders and when engaging in relation with countries outside the EU.

At its foundation human rights are almost a revolutionary concept, a way to secure that everyone, all citizens have rights - that rights are not limited to the privileged few.

The EU's human rights and democracy policy encompasses civil, political, economic and social and cultural rights. The EU is adamant about protecting the universal nature of human rights when this is questioned on grounds of cultural or political differences. The EU furthermore believes that democracy is the only political system which can fully realize all human rights.

Conscious that the respect for human rights and democracy cannot be taken for granted, we strongly believe in empowering individuals and organizations, such as the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, in promoting freedom, democracy and human rights.
The EU and its Member States also actively engages in multilateral fora and supports efforts by regional organizations, such as ASEAN, to further the human rights and democracy agenda.

Human rights and democracy represent guiding principles for the European Union’s external actions. All cooperation, as well as trade agreements with third countries contain a clause stipulating that human rights are an essential element in relations between the parties.

This is for instance the case of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that was signed in 2012 between the EU and the Philippines, and that will enter into force, once the pending ratification by the Philippines and two EU Member States is completed.

To date, the EU pursues formal Human Rights Dialogues with over 40 countries. In the case of the Philippines, formal exchanges on human rights take place on a regular basis through the GSP+ monitoring mechanism which is the opportunity to recall EU well-known positions on various issues to the Philippine government.

It is also an opportunity for partner countries to raise concerns about issues in the EU, we are well aware that no country is perfect, no EU Member State would claim that its human rights record is flawless. Therefore, to get an outside view, to hear concerns from partner countries about the human rights situation in Europe provides a new and welcome perspective.

In the coming years, we are hopeful that the Commission on Human Rights will continue to fulfil its mandate, as foreseen in the 1987 Constitution, and we congratulate Chairman Chito Gascon and CHR Commissioners for their relentless efforts to promote human rights in the Philippines.

I thank you for your attention.

Franz Jessen

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