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Senate

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MESSAGE

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Mabuhay! As some of you may know, that is a quintessentially Filipino greeting, through which I convey to you my most heartfelt and warmest greetings from inside the detention facility of the Philippine National Police here in Camp Crame, along with reassurances that, even while I am unable to be physically present, I am nonetheless, standing together with you, and I remain to be fully committed with our common interests in protecting, upholding and fighting for human rights. In fact, you can say that this is true, now, more than ever.

Writing these words down makes me realize all over again how utterly surreal my present situation is. From being the Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, and the Justice Secretary of the Republic of the Philippines, to being a prisoner in my own country.

I may have thus far been under detention for twenty (20) days (note: as of the date of this writing, 15 March 2017), but these three (3) weeks of incarceration, even coming in the wake of months after months of public persecution at the hands of my tormentors, have not been enough to blunt the very absurdity of finding myself jailed for, of all things, trumped up illegal drug trading charges!

However, as unusual as my present circumstances are, there is solace to be found in my current state of impaired liberty.

For one, I know I am innocent. I am not, nor have I ever been, involved in the illegal drug trade, nor have I ever profited from it. Though I suffer physical discomfort and intolerable impairments to my capacity to perform my solemn duties as a lawmaker and a human rights advocate, my conscience suffers not one whit and, in fact, I am at peace with myself.

So, too, I now know myself in ways I never did before.

At my age and given my upbringing, education, profession and other life opportunities I have been fortunate enough to have had, I used to think that I have already led a full life. I have been a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a lawyer, a public servant, a human rights advocate, a grandmother and a lawmaker. I used to think that there is no other aspect of my personhood, of my humanity, that I have not yet explored. Yet, these experiences of the past several months have made me realize that I have been living in a bubble. I have seen and fought injustice. I have seen and fought against human rights violations. I have seen and know what suffering looks like. But I have never been a victim. I have never felt injustice, or have been on the receiving end of human rights violations, and have never known true suffering the way I do now. Fighting as an advocate for others is one thing. Fighting as a victim, as sufferer and a survivor has *gifted* me with insights I have never had before.

Yes, all this has been a gift. For I believe that this gives me an opportunity to be an even better, even more passionate and, hopefully, more effective human rights defender.

I also take solace in knowing that I am here, in detention, because I did not make the compromises that so-called well-meaning colleagues wanted me to make.

Early on, there were those who were urging me to keep quiet. To bide my time. To try to pacify the newly elected populist President by not calling for an investigation into the spate of extrajudicial killings that arose in connection with his so-called "War on Drugs". I refused. I delivered a privilege speech condemning the killings, I filed a resolution calling on the Philippine Senate to conduct an inquiry in aid of legislation, and another one calling on the Executive Department, through our Department of Foreign Affairs, to invite the United Nations Special Rapporteur extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions to visit the country and conduct her own fact-finding investigation.

My reasoning is simple: how can I bide my time when our people are being killed by the hundreds and even thousands every month? According to the statistics being kept by local media, based, in turn on official data from the Philippine National Police, as of March 13, 2017, there have been over 7,000 deaths, both from so-called “legitimate police operations” and vigilante-style or unexplained killings,¹ with some of these killings from so-called “legitimate police operations” falling into a pattern of involving a suspect who allegedly resisted arrest and was, therefore, killed. These numbers would likely be much, much higher it were not for the fact that so-called “police operations” were “temporarily suspended on January 30, 2017, when the President instructed the Philippine National Police (PNP) to first rid its ranks of corrupt personnel,”² after some policemen were reportedly involved in the kidnap and murder of a South Korean national,³ who was revealed to have been killed inside the PNP Headquarters in Camp Crame itself. Yes, the very same place where I am currently detained.

What was I supposed to wait for? More killings? For the political climate to turn? For the President and his men to stop making pronouncements that veritably give law enforcers the license to kill suspects at will by saying that they will not be punished for something that the President himself ordered? Should I have simply waited and prayed that the President and his Secretary of Justice will stop making statements that “criminals are not part of humanity”, implying that they may be killed with impunity since they should not be accorded their right to life?

Waiting to act, while people are dying, is, to me, unacceptable. To me, and to anyone who truly values human life, one death is one too many.

I also find solace in knowing, now, who are the people who truly stand with me in the fight for human rights; who are willing to take a stand without fear or favor. I have now seen who are only there as “fair weather human rights advocates”, the ones who see the human rights movement as merely a political instrument for their own personal gain an advancement, and who will abandon ship the moment the political climate turns inclement.

I count myself fortunate to now know the difference.

Now, I fight for my freedom. Of course, I fight for it because, like any other human being, I value my right to life, liberty and security. But, truly and in all honesty, that pales in comparison to my desire to be able to continue

¹ <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/145814-numbers-statistics-philippines-war-drugs>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

fighting the state-sponsored killings, the culture of impunity, corruption, despotism and moral degradation that is now afflicting my country.

In the first place, that is why I am here where I am now. Because they want me silenced and neutralized. They need me to be unable to do what I have always done: call out the abuses and violations that I see, and do what I could, as a lawyer, as a Senator and as a human rights advocate, to ensure a stop to the killings. I, for one, do not think it is a coincidence that I was arrested and detained on a Friday, February 24, and on the following Monday, February 27, "the President allowed the PNP back into the 'war on drugs'".⁴ I also do not think it is a coincidence that I was incarcerated just as important pieces of legislation, including the reimposition of the Death Penalty, are being considered in the Senate, and just as hearings about corruption in the Duterte administration, and the public confession of the self-professed right-hand man of the President in the so-called Davao Death Squad, Arturo Lascañas, came out to corroborate the testimony of a previous witness, Edgar Matobato, before the Senate.

It is a surreal time for me and for the rest of my people. Killings by the state is being normalized. Human rights defenders are persecuted and made out into the villain – all while the incompetencies and acts of betrayal of public trust are being whitewashed.

But, in truth, there is no better time to fight for what you believe in than when it is under attack. This is when the challenge to rise to the occasion becomes all the greater.

This is when ordinary people are given the opportunity to be the fullest and truest human beings they can be.

And that's how I view my current situation: with equanimity, peace in spirit, but with the fiery passion and conviction of a human rights defender who is not just an advocate, but also a victim and a survivor.

My freedom of movement may be restrained; but I will not be silenced. I will not be cowed. I refuse to bow down to a tyrant. I will defend until the Rule of Law, Justice and respect for Human Rights once again prevail in my country and among my people.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to allow my voice to be heard.

⁴ *Ibid.*