



Diocese of San Carlos
The Roman Catholic Bishop of San Carlos

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Solidarity Statement for Political Prisoners

***"I was in prison and you visited me...
For whatever you do to the least of my people,
you did it to me!" [Mt. 25:36]***

Pope Francis, referring to persons deprived of liberty, once said that *"the way in which these 'least ones' are treated is a measure of the dignity and the hope of a society"* [Pope Francis in Bahrain, November 2022]. Mahatma Gandhi is even quoted to have said, *"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."*

In observance then of the **75th Anniversary of the International Declaration of Human Rights**, these words of Our Lord Jesus Christ challenge us to care concretely for those deprived of liberty [PDL] and political prisoners [PPs], as we do the same for our environmental and land defenders, for our indigenous people, for EJK victims and their families, for persons with disability, for our migrant workers, for public jeepney drivers and operators, among many others.

For if we truly *"walk our talk"* and live up to our *"We leave no one behind"* battle cry, we cannot but be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters behind bars, particularly the political prisoners on Negros island. That day, at least 100 out of 137 political prisoners on the island have undertaken a 24-hour fast to raise awareness on the resumption of peace talks and fight for their rights.

In line with this year's theme of *"Dignity, Freedom, and Justice for All,"* I hereby express my solidarity with them and give support to their objectives for their said fasting.

It is my sincere hope that their actions and intentions will lead to positive outcomes, including the success of peace talks that guarantee security and immunity for all involved, the immediate release of detained NDF peace talks consultants, the unconditional release of political prisoners nationwide, and the abrogation of the terrorist designation of the NDF and its personnel involved in the peace talks.

Additionally, I urge once more for the release of ailing elderly political prisoners, such as 75-year-old *Frank Fernandez* and 84-year-old *Gerardo de la Peña*, who are currently detained at the National Bilibid Prison in Metro Manila. Their age and health conditions call for humanitarian considerations.

In standing up for the rights and well-being of political prisoners, we uphold the principles of our Catholic Social Teachings and strive for a society that values dignity, freedom, and justice for all.

Together, let us continue to advocate for the fair and just treatment of prisoners, ensuring that their rights are respected, and their humanity upheld. By doing so, we contribute to building a society that values compassion, equality, and the inherent dignity of every individual.

Most Rev. Gerardo A. Alminaza, D.D.
Bishop, Diocese of San Carlos
Feast of St. John of the Cross
December 14, 2023

Negros PPs' Press Release for Human Rights Day 2023

100 NEGROS POLITICAL PRISONERS TO FAST ON DECEMBER 10 FOR GRP-NDF PEACE TALKS

Political prisoners in Negros will hold another day-long fast this coming December 10 (Sunday) to express their unequivocal support to the recently announced resumption of the peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF).

GRP and NDF representatives signed a Joint Statement last November 23 in the European city of Oslo, which formalized their intention to go back to the negotiating table after a 6-year hiatus, as witnessed by their third party facilitator, the Royal Norwegian Government.

In a press release, the human rights group Kapatid-Negros Occidental chapter said at least 100 of Negros island's 137 political prisoners will join the 24-hour fast, opting to subsist on liquids in lieu of their full meals.

The political prisoners hope that facilitating factors conducive to the success of the peace talks would be immediately processed, like the assurance that all those involved in the peace talks would enjoy security and immunity guarantees, the immediate release of at least 17 detained NDF peace talks consultants, the unconditional release of the almost 800 political prisoners nationwide, and the abrogation of the terrorist designation of the NDF and its personnel involved in the peace talks, Kapatid said.

For political prisoners, these concerns are not conditionalities; rather, these are inputs whose importance were learned from the decades-long peace talks, it clarified.

The Negros political prisoners are also calling on the Marcos Jr. government to release on humanitarian grounds ailing elderly PPs like 75-year old Frank Fernandez and 84-year old Gerardo de la Peña, who are both detained at the National Bilibid Prison in Metro Manila, it added.

Last Monday, 44 male and female political prisoners at the Negros Occidental District Jail (NODJ) in Bago City attended a mass officiated by Bishop Gerardo Alminaza of the Catholic Diocese of San Carlos. Data from human rights groups show that more than half of the 137 PPs in Negros island today are jailed in, or were residents of cities and towns under the jurisdiction of the said diocese. The human rights group said Bishop Alminaza came to NODJ upon the invitation of the political prisoners.

Kapatid, the organization of the families and friends of PPs in Negros, are also calling for a number of reforms consistent with the spirit and intent of the 2015 United Nations Standard Minimum Rules on the Treatment of Prisoners, otherwise known as the Nelson Mandela Rules.

It is the obligation of the Philippine government to comply with the provisions of the Mandela Rules, as well as other international and domestic rules on human rights concerning prisoners, regardless of whether they are under custodial investigation, are detained and undergoing trial, or already convicted with finality, Kapatid said.

Kapatid revealed that among the concerns needing appropriate government action in order to improve the situation of political prisoners and all other Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs), are the following:

- 1 Stop to the physical and psychological torture of arrested accused persons by Army and police elements, especially before they are remanded to the BJMP;
- 2 Surfacing of apprehended and disappeared accused persons like Lyngrace Marturillas, Renel de los Santos, Denald Mialen and Deah Lopez, who remain missing to this day after being arrested by elements of the 94th IB and 15th IB on April 20 in Hinigaran and September 21 in Sipalay City, respectively;
- 3 Increase in the daily food budget of PDLs, from the current P70/day/PDL to a more realistic P100/day/PDL, via the timely intervention of Congress and the various local government units (LGUs);
- 4 Increase in the daily medicine budget of PDLs, from the current P14/day/PDL to a more desirable P25/day/PDL, via an allocation from Congress;
- 5 Resolution of the widespread problem of jail over-congestion, which research show is the third worst in the world, and which forces many PDLs - including those in Negros - to sleep on cramped cots (like in Binalbagan, where there are only 7 double decks for 100 PDLs), on the cold cement floor (like in San Carlos City, where - as an example - 7 of the 11 political prisoners there have no cots of their own), or on makeshift hammocks (like in Guihulngan City, where a number of PDLs do so due to lack of facilities);
- 6 More judicious trial of cases to avoid unnecessarily-prolonged detention, the more extreme instances of which include those of political prisoners Wilfredo Arellano, William Paunillan, and Sandalo Mongolores of Guihulngan City Jail, whose charges have not been decided, even after 16 years of unjust incarceration; and
- 7 Full implementation by the BJMP of the spirit and intent of Republic Act 7438, including the basic rights of PDLs to regularly confer with - via telephone or otherwise - and/or be visited by their legal counsels and family members, as well as their priest-confessors and medical doctors, of their own choice.

Kapatid concluded by saying that the 137 political prisoners in Negros - part of the almost 800 PPs all over the country - are also united in calling for justice for Atty Ben Ramos, Atty. Anthony Trinidad, Escalante City Councilor Toto Patigas, and Karapatan paralegal workers Zara Alvarez and Elisa Badayos, whose extra-judicial killings during the Duterte regime made more difficult the enjoyment of the basic rights of political prisoners to, among others, due process of law, presumption of innocence and competent and independent counsels. -30-