

## **Reach Out to Pinoys at Home**

Keynote Address by Ambassador Lauro Baja, Jr.  
During the 2007 TOFA (Twenty Outstanding Filipinos Abroad) Awards  
31 August 2007, Washington D.C.

With a full heart and a great sense of gratitude, I am deeply humbled by this recognition as a Man of All Seasons and by your kind invitation to keynote the 2007 TOFA awards. Congratulations to all awardees for all your great achievements.

I have a great affinity to Filipino Image Magazine and Pinoy Global Online News as well as for its objectives and purposes. For indeed I feel that the organization is at the heart of my lifetime commitment as a member of the Philippine diplomatic service. We share the same visions of empowering the Philippines to play its rightful role in the international community and of Filipinos actively participating in the social, political, economic and cultural life of their country of residence.

We now live in a global village. What is on the other side of the world is now a mere 12 hour plane ride, some few minutes in the internet.

The Filipinos are now global citizens. We are the nurses, caregivers and doctors in numerous capitals of the world. We are the quarter of a million seafarers manning most of the world's commercial ships. We are the constructions workers and members of households in the Middle East and in our neighboring countries, the software engineers in Ireland and Australia, the artists in New York's Broadway and London's West End. We live in a world where each square mile is made of people with different national identities, of different ethnicities and individual personalities.

Today international relations are not a matter of states alone but more important they are a matter among peoples. In many significant ways, this development resonates the vision of the leaders who wrote the charter of the United Nations which refers to "we the peoples" rather than "all states". For the peoples are the perpetrators at the same time victims of today's tumultuous times. Something is terribly wrong when one reads and hears that genocide and other crimes against humanity occur with impunity in many parts of this civilized world. Something is seriously wrong when one hears or reads that a suicide bomber blew herself up amid students who were ready to sit for exams, or a suicide bomber disguised as a health worker blew himself up near a crowd gathered for a ceremony to open a new hospital. Something is not right in international relations when billions are spent in weapons of mass destruction while half of humanity live on less than a dollar a day.

The Philippines is well placed to play a significant role in world affairs as it did in the last 3 years in the United Nations.

Let me cite a few examples of how the Philippines engages the UN and the international community. As a founding member of the UN, the Philippines supports a multilateral system that is anchored in the Organization and its institutions. We participate in the UN processes in this mantra and gear our efforts toward strengthening the Organization in the protection and promotion of the welfare of people. In our widely-acclaimed membership of the Security Council, we were lauded by the Secretary-General and member states for bringing back unity in the Council and the United Nations to the core of multilateralism. We were given the opportunity to preside twice over this crown jewel of the UN, including a historic summit, and put the Philippines firmly in its radar screen. For the first time in the history of the Council and during our presidency, civil society was given the opportunity to attend and speak in its formal meetings when their presence is both relevant and necessary. Our efforts to reform the working methods of the Council, of building bridges between the permanent and non-permanent members, and our chairmanships of several committees were likewise recognized. After our term in the Security Council and the acknowledgement of all these, we topped the elections to another important UN body – ECOSOC, for the first time the country accomplished such a feat. We were twice acting President of the General Assembly last year and won a seat in the new Human Rights Council against tremendous odds. ASEAN became an observer in the UN under our chairmanship.

Three Philippine advocacies in the UN endure. The first is our successful effort to have the UN acknowledge the important nexus between international migration and development, cognizant of the reality that more than 10% of us are in more than 170 countries of the world.

The second is the promotion of interfaith dialogue and cooperation to achieve peace and security.

The third is our proposed debt for equity in MDG projects such as education, healthcare, housing, infrastructures, reforestation and related projects

I am proud to say that the Filipino is as good, and oftentimes better, as any other national, given a level playing field. Of course, his role in the international community is determined to a significant extent by the length and the depth of the shadow cast by the Philippines. The challenge for the leadership of our country is to identify, recognize and develop our cultures, our virtues and traditional values, and use them to lengthen and deepen our presence in the international community. This means being concerned not only with issues that have important political constituencies but more so with issues that matter most – rule of law, education, healthcare, poverty reduction. The leadership should also ensure that the benefits of strong economic indicators reach the millions of urban and rural poor, not just the usual narrow elites.

The challenge for the Department of Foreign Affairs is to provide the institutions, the policies, and the leadership to meet the changing times. Endow the men and women with the requisite financial and manpower tools to fulfill their mandate and you will have strong institutions. Always keep an eye on history,

ears on the realities of the present and formulate your policies with coherence and relevance. When you are in command: command, with all the moral force and character to a galvanized agenda of foreign policy. Stand up for your men and women, fight for them and for the values and principle you share with them. This is leadership at its most inspiring. In foreign relations, silence is not golden. Never hesitate to say and do, what needs to be said and done. Also in foreign relations, you cannot cram and expect to lead and shape events. The best ambassadors never take foreign policy mulligans and the best foreign secretaries never need them. The DFA is too important an institution of government to allow it to drift towards dysfunction or disrepute.

The challenge for Pinoy Global Online News and for Filipinos overseas led by the 20 TOFA awardees is to produce a critical mass of highly empowered and motivated Filipinos who have a sense of nation and want to build on it. We have to reconnect with the masses for survival in today's highly interconnected world demands a strong national competitive spirit.

I believe that Filipinos overseas can be the champions that Filipinos at home could look up to, who could champion the cause of unity, who can excite the intellect and stir the soul of our people.

I urge all of you to become more engaged, get more involved with our country and our people. Our future is guaranteed only by the degree of our personal involvement and commitment. We can not look for leadership beyond ourselves nor wait for someone or something to do the job for us.

Filipinos have been given mountains to climb and strength to climb them. I have full faith in our ability and determination to collectively overcome our challenges if we dare to stand, speak and act together. Filipinos overseas, I am sure will give the strength and empower our kababayans back home to roll up our sleeves, look the challenges straight in the face and spit in their eyes.

Every great achievement begins with a mission impossible. Reach out to our kababayans back home and build bridges to celebrate our similarities and our differences. For without bridges, we will all be islands. At the end of the day, a man's reach should always be higher than his grasp, for otherwise what are the heavens for.

Mabuhay ang Pilipinas.....