

OPENING REMARKS

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His Excellency, the Ambassador of Japan, Mr. Makoto Katsura; Director of UNAFEI, Mr. Masaki Sasaki; our visiting experts; the participants of this seminar from the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

My dear participants of this three-day seminar: On behalf of the Department of Justice, the sponsor of this seminar, I welcome all the participants, especially our foreign guests, to our country – the Philippines. I also extend a welcome from the Secretary of Justice, Secretary Leila M. De Lima, who is now in Washington D.C., attending an international conference on corruption that requires the attendance of many secretaries of justice from all over the world.

Why do some crimes go unpunished? Why do criminals just go on their merry way? The big names and the big fish, the high and the mighty, they are all almost visual. It is because they have all the means to bribe, the means to hide, the means to protect themselves; but more than that, they have the means and the motive to harass and intimidate witnesses and even kill witnesses and whistle-blowers. And in the Philippines, kill they will. A living example would be the Maguindanao massacre. Many witnesses were silenced and the killers realized that they have cultured a prevalent impunity. This is not only the case in the Philippines but in most Southeast Asian countries. So, this seminar comes at a very opportune time when the President, during his State of the Nation Address, mentioned the strengthening of the Witness Protection Program as well as the primary programmes of the new administration under his presidency. Indeed, the administration of justice will fail unless we come up with a strong, effective programme to protect and to secure witnesses and whistle-blowers. In the Philippines, for example, we have many laws intended to protect whistle-blowers. In fact, we have the Witness Protection and Security Benefit Program which was passed as early as 1991. And then we have some pending bills in the Senate: one of them, the bill of Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago, establishes a whistle-blower bill of rights, and we have the same provisions in the impeachment proceedings in the House of Representatives. We have likewise the same provision in our Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003. Also, in our National Drug Law Enforcement and Prevention Coordinating Center, we also have this provision to protect and secure whistle-blowers and witnesses. In a very recent resolution passed by the Supreme Court, the rule of the Writ of Amparo, includes provisions for the protection and security of whistle-blowers – it is one of the important features of the Writ of Amparo. And even our many offices and agencies in the government, like the Bureau of Corrections, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Department of Social Welfare and Development, in cases of administrative proceedings, all have almost similar provisions to protect and secure whistle-blowers. And as it happens, the Philippines has good initiatives and good laws, but bad implementation - almost always. So, this is a challenge to all the participants in this seminar: that we come up with solutions to protect and secure whistle-blowers and to send the message to criminals that silencing a witness or a whistle-blower is no longer an option. Thank you very much and good day!