

**Ambassador Harry K. Thomas, Jr.**  
**Remarks for Manila Overseas Press Club**  
**“Diplomatic Night,” July 6, 2010**

Manila Overseas Press Club President Romualdez, Chairman Lopez, fellow members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished journalists, honored guests:

I am delighted to have been invited here with you this evening for Diplomatic Night. Looking around, I understand why an invitation to this gathering of luminaries is so highly prized. I accepted Tony and Babe’s kind offer because I am excited by the opportunities presented by the inauguration of President Aquino – and because Babe promised me I wouldn’t have to sing or dance.

Before I begin, I wish to extend my appreciation to the men and women of the Philippine media for your professionalism and perseverance, in one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Every attack against journalists should be investigated, and the perpetrators prosecuted in accordance with the law. The pursuit of truth is at times dangerous, yet journalists like you stand as guardians of free speech, champions of democracy, and proponents of transparency.

For journalists like you, and for diplomats like me, this has been an exciting, amazing time in the Philippines. Not even a week ago we were all witnesses to history as President Benigno Aquino took the oath of office. I was impressed by the simplicity of the event, by the fervor of the people, and by a president who has ignited the hopes of a nation. So much is possible when a leader brings popular support, a clear vision and a determined team together to build a new future. What a tremendous opportunity – and at the same time a tremendous challenge – President Aquino faces.

Let me assure you that he can count on the United States to be one of his many allies as he charts a new course for the Philippines. We respect the sovereignty of the Filipino people and their government. We value the friendship that has taken us through war and peace together. We need the partnership that allows our two countries to build a safer, more prosperous world for our citizens whether they are in the U.S., the Philippines, or travelling through this increasingly inter-connected world.

I will take questions on any of the many issues the U.S. and the Philippines work on together, but let me raise three key topics with you first.

The first is our shared effort to strengthen our partnerships for security. Each day, news headlines remind us that terrorists continue to sow the seeds of fear and hatred around the globe. In Mindanao, terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf bomb town halls and churches, kidnap teachers and fishermen, and create an atmosphere of fear that inhibits education and development. The Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police have taken an increasingly effective posture against terrorists, and we have been privileged to support their efforts at the invitation of the government. Let me say, for the record, that the temporarily deployed components of the Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines do not, repeat not, engage in combat. They offer information, training, technical and medical support to the very brave AFP soldiers who are on the front lines.

Our security cooperation is vital in the counter-terrorism effort, but also in the effort to provide better lives to our citizens. The Philippines has been a gracious host to joint training exercises that allow both our militaries to practice skills to ensure we are effective partners whether working on a UN peacekeeping mission or responding to a natural disaster in Manila, in New Orleans, or in Haiti. The Visiting Forces Agreement makes this cooperation possible in an atmosphere of absolute respect for Philippine sovereignty. As we enter another typhoon season, we all remember the heroic cooperation between our two militaries that saved lives and offered much-appreciated relief to tens of thousands of people last year. This is the kind of partnership that saves lives.

There is another life-threatening challenge we need to face together, and that is the second topic I want to dwell on a moment – the horror of trafficking in persons. Human trafficking, a modern day form of slavery, exploits vulnerable women and children here in the Philippines, in the United States, and around the world. The Philippines is undertaking significant efforts in the fight against human trafficking and I've seen some of those efforts myself. Two weeks ago, I traveled to Cebu and visited shelters maintained by the local Department of Social Welfare and Development. I met with representatives from the Cebu City Prosecutor's Office, the Philippine National Police, NGOs, DSWD, and the Departments of Labor and Employment, Health, and Tourism and learned from them about their efforts to rescue victims of human trafficking and to prosecute offenders. It was a privilege to meet people who

are on the frontlines of combating this major problem. These are the heroes of a hidden struggle, and we need to put a bright light on their efforts. This year I hope the Philippines will continue this progress by prosecuting and convicting more of the criminals who exploit the weak and vulnerable. Count on us to do our part, by supporting those who help victims, by providing technical information to responsible offices, and by sharing case leads so attorneys from both countries can work in tandem to apprehend criminals and rescue victims.

A contributing factor in trafficking, both in the Philippines and in the United States, is poverty, and that is topic number three. President Aquino told me he was the “jobs” candidate, and I greatly appreciate the wisdom of his insight. Adequate, well-paying jobs mean fewer trafficking victims, less corruption, a more secure environment for investment, and most important of all, a better quality of life for families.

President Aquino has laid out the vision, and as I said, we are honored to support those goals. Programs of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) support local efforts to promote the development of a more peaceful and prosperous Philippines that can better provide an improved quality of life and future for all Filipinos. Our development assistance programs in the Philippines link directly to U.S. Government global foreign assistance priorities - good governance, human rights, economic growth, family health, education, energy and environment. Sixty percent of USAID’s assistance supports economic development, peace and security in Mindanao. The U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Philippine Government have been working together to develop a grant agreement, or compact, focused on reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth with continued focus on fighting corruption. Volunteers of the U.S. Peace Corps work in communities all over the Philippines to support social development of youth, English education, environmental protection, and public health. Some of them are helping victims of human trafficking to rebuild their lives. If the Philippine Government approves, we hope to nearly double the number of Peace Corps volunteers in the Philippines this year.

One key opportunity for economic growth, development, and job creation is investment in the renewable energy market. In an era of global warming and growing energy demands, the Philippines has potential for tremendous growth in this sector. Through investment in sources of energy such as geothermal, hydro, solar, and wind – the Philippines, along with the U.S., can work toward clean energy projects and growth for the future. Less red tape and less corruption

will help attract investment from the United States in renewable energy and other sectors – which is good for business, good for the economy, and good for Mother Earth.

So these are three big issues that are on my mind as I look forward to the exciting days and months ahead. I believe our cooperation with the Philippines can bring increased security for both our nations. I believe that working together we can confront modern day slave-traders who treat humans like commodities. I believe that the U.S. can contribute to President Aquino's goals of creating jobs and opportunities here in the Philippines that will help us achieve our shared goals of sustainable prosperity for the global community.

I look forward to working with the Filipino people and new administration to pursue our common visions and work toward the future. And I look forward to working with all of you – friends in the media who help us inform Filipinos about all these partnerships; fellow members of the diplomatic corps who are pursuing common goals with the Philippines; and friends in the business community whose companies employ millions and contribute to the expansion of the economy.

Once again, thank you for inviting me to join you here tonight, and thank you for the work you do to support and defend the right of the people to be informed. *Maraming salamat.*