BEARING THE LIGHT OF CHRIST AGAINST THE SHADOWS OF EMPIRE

A Joint Pastoral Letter on Philippine Sovereignty, National Patrimony, and Human Dignity

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." — John 1:5

Peace in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who is the Light of the World!

We, Bishops of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, express grave concern over the growing entrenchment of US political, economic, and military influence in the Philippines. These developments take on greater significance amid the expanding use of Philippine territory to advance US military and corporate interests, particularly in light of the forthcoming 49th ASEAN Summit in Manila and the planned visit of US President Donald Trump. We are deeply concerned that the Philippines is being drawn further into the US imperialist agenda, placing our territory and resources at the service of foreign interests and undermining our national sovereignty and independence.

Beyond undermining national sovereignty, expanding foreign military cooperation may also intensify the government's militarized counterinsurgency campaign, escalate armed conflict, and further endanger civilian communities already living amid armed conflict. Military operations expose civilians to deaths and injuries, bombardment, displacement, arbitrary arrests, and other human rights violations. Rather than addressing the roots of insurgency, such militarization deepens social injustice and perpetuates the cycle of violence. We urge the government to abandon an exclusively militarized response to insurgency and exercise genuine political will to resolve the conflict through dialogue, substantive reforms, and peace negotiations.

In light of these pressing realities, we declare the following positions:

1. We oppose the continuing expansion of US military presence in the Philippines under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), and Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). These arrangements undermine national sovereignty, deepen dependence on foreign military power, and expose our communities to geopolitical conflict. We affirm that genuine national security rests on sovereignty, social justice, and peaceful relations among nations.

2. We reject development policies that place foreign corporate and strategic interests above the welfare of our people and the integrity of creation. Mining, corporate land development, and initiatives such as Pax Silica demand scrutiny for their implications for national economic sovereignty, indigenous peoples' ancestral domains, farmers' lands, workers' rights, and local communities. We affirm that genuine development must uphold human dignity, economic justice, and the common good.

3. We denounce red-tagging, political persecution, harassment, intimidation, and the criminalization of dissent against human rights defenders, farmers, workers, indigenous peoples, and church workers. We denounce the use of state power to silence legitimate opposition, suppress community organizing, and undermine the people's democratic rights and freedoms. We call for an end to these abuses, the protection of civil liberties, and accountability for those responsible.

We strongly call on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and his administration to uphold their obligations to the Filipino people and take immediate action to:

1. End foreign military presence by withdrawing all US troops and military personnel from Philippine territory and abrogating agreements that institutionalize foreign military intervention and undermine national sovereignty. Pursue an independent foreign policy that upholds the Filipino people's interests and right to self-determination.

2. Defend national patrimony against foreign and corporate plunder by ending the exploitation of natural resources, the dispossession of ancestral domains and agricultural lands, and economic policies that subordinate national interests to foreign corporations. Pursue genuine agrarian reform, national industrialization, and people's sovereign control over national resources.

3. End state repression and ensure accountability by stopping human rights violations, ending the criminalization of dissent and persecution of government critics, and investigating and prosecuting state forces and public officials responsible for abuses, including those who ordered or enabled them.

4. Address the root causes of poverty and armed conflict through genuine social and economic reforms, equitable development, meaningful democratic participation, and principled peace negotiations toward a just and lasting peace.

As disciples of Christ, the Light of the World (John 8:12), we are called to bear witness to what is good, right, and true. Our commitment to sovereignty, justice, human dignity, and the protection of creation is inseparable from our Christian vocation. We, therefore, call upon our clergy, lay faithful, and all people of goodwill to stand with communities defending their lands, livelihoods, and rights. Let our faith move us beyond words into acts of solidarity, compassion, and courage. In standing with those who struggle for justice and defend life, may we remain faithful to Christ and bear witness to the light that no darkness can overcome.

Let our light shine together, in faith, service, and solidarity.

In Christ,

(Sgd.) **THE MOST REVD JOEL PORLARES**
Obispo Maximo
Iglesia Filipina Independiente

(Sgd.) **THE MOST REVD NESTOR POLTIC**
Prime Bishop
Episcopal Church in the Philippines

(Sgd.) **BISHOP JOSEPH AGPAOA**
General Secretary
United Church of Christ in the Philippines

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